

My Backpacking Memoirs

Version - 4



Tholos of Delphi

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Being Fired - 2016

"Only after disaster can we be resurrected. It's only after you've lost everything that you're free to do anything. Nothing is static, everything is evolving, everything is falling apart."

— **Chuck Palahniuk, Fight Club**

It has been over two years since my backpacking trip around Europe and I find myself constantly trying to piece my memories together. Not always knowing what city or even country a memory occurred. I feel my memories are deteriorating so I decided to document them before they fall apart completely.

I guess the story of how I decided to go travelling begins a year earlier. I was working a low paid job in a very small software company, long hours, no holiday allowance, no management, no training. I had not spoke to a woman in a year. This was my 3rd job and I started right after completing my 2nd degree, a relentless pace that looking back achieved nothing. I would spend the working week in the office and do nothing on weekends, after completing my education I found I no longer had goals. My job offered me nothing, I could see no positives in my future. I often wanted to fast forward my life like wanting to know the ending to a bad VHS tape.

I started looking for alternatives to escape, I applied to a single PhD at a university just far enough away from my parents house so I would be forced to move out of my village. My parents didn't want me to rent or get a mortgage, they believed it was best for me to save up enough money to buy a house in cash. This would have taken me 10 years living like this. But to have an offer for a PhD, well they could not morally stop me leaving. My salary at the time was so low that the PhD grant was only slightly lower, with other benefits I would likely be better off financially. I didn't hear anything from them for 2 or 3 weeks and assumed I had been rejected.

I forgot about it for 2 months and then one day I get an invitation for an interview, but it was with only two days notice. I had not taken anytime off work all year, how could they expect me to attend an interview at two days notice? I had my own projects and deadlines. I ask to reschedule and they offer me a telephone interview instead, so I take it. I had forgotten the phone call itself but they offer me the position.

I hear nothing from them for 2 months and forget about the position for the 2nd time. Then I get a phone call. I re-engage with the university but ask for a face to face meeting to try and get a real idea of what is going on. I knew going in to the project that the university was obviously very disorganised. If it was a small no name company I would have withdrawn my application months ago, but it was a large regional university with seemingly excellent facilities and staff. I thought I could learn something new and progress my now stagnant life. I drive out to the university, it was only a 1 hour 30 minute drive away but it was the furthest I had been away from home in 9 years.

The building was impressive, the two people I was meeting with seemed like great people to work with and the city was clearly much wealthier than I was used to. The day went well and I drove back home. The first day back at work I handed in my notice at my job. At this point I had totally lost focus, I was not functioning and for someone who normally works extremely hard it was the

worst feeling in the world. Knowing you are letting down your employer but also not knowing how to become motivated again. In hindsight this was at least partially the fault of my employer, but I felt very guilty at the time.

I had expected to start my PhD next month but it did not happen for another 4 months. The university was so disorganised they did not know who I was, they had offered me the position but seemingly not told anyone in the admissions department. I wait for a few months and assume I had been rejected for the third time and start looking for another job, but make sure to look further afield. I get a few job offers and after 4 months the university re-engage with me yet again and tell me I can start next week. I knew that I was making a mistake in accepting this offer, I knew it was a form of self destruction, but I did it anyway.

I make the move to the city, rent a room and start the project. I find an upcoming event in London that was highly relevant to my PhD, it was a niche area at the time and I had not spoke to many people involved in it. I decided to give it a go. At the time London felt a very far away place despite only being 4 hours away by train. I book a train ticket and decide to make it a longer visit, 5 days in total. But I did not know where to stay, London was expensive and I was cheap, all those years saving up to buy a house and escape the village. I look online and find that London has hostels. To me hostels were places people go when they are ill or have addictions, not somewhere a person would go voluntarily. But I look at them and find that tourist hostels exist, they were cheap and they don't look totally shit. I take the leap and book one.

I buy a large Regatta Survivor 2 65L backpack to carry my stuff. It was bigger than I expected but I knew it would be useful in the future. The day comes and I pack up enough clothes for a week, walk to the train station and go to London. The last time I was this far away from my village I was still in school. This was actually my 3rd time going to London, but both previous trips had been day trips from school and one was when I was 9 years old. I had not explored London before, or any city as big as it. The idea that a city can be so big it needs an underground train system, surely you could walk across London?

I arrive in London and check into the hostel Clink78. I picked it because it was cheap and not that far away from the train station. I spent the evening on my laptop. My room was small and it was a very hot period of summer, I went to bed around 11pm. Just after going to bed an old and very fat man comes into the room with his bags, he is on a bed the other side of the small room. Just as he enters the room he leaves again and does not come back. At 6am I awake to a really loud alarm clock. I ignore it for 10 minutes hoping someone will turn it off but after 10 minutes I'm totally awake. I look around to see the man from last night almost naked lying on his bed with no sheets. It is his alarm going off, it was coming from a hide away shelf above his bed. He must have been so drunk even his alarm could not wake him.

I give it another 10 minutes and at this point everyone in the room is awake, sitting up and looking at each other. I get up out of my bed and throw a hostel towel over his legs. He sits up and shouts something about me being an asshole and how he is also an asshole, he repeats the same sentence 3 or 4 times. He turns off his alarm clock and goes back to sleep, like he was on auto pilot, never fully gaining consciousness from his alcohol fuelled coma. I however am now wide awake and I don't feel safe sleeping in the room with this guy so I leave the hostel for the day sleep deprived at 7am. What a terrible first experience in a hostel.

I spend the first 4 days going from The British museum, to the V&A museum, Science museum, natural history museum. Just museum after museum, walking the whole way back and forth across London, through parks, residential areas, almost getting run over by the crazy fast cyclists that ride faster than the cars drive. For the first time I really understand just how rich other parts of the UK are. I may live in one of the richest countries in the world but what good is that living in a village? I attend the conference on the final day and travel back by train.

Back at university everything is disorganised beyond belief, full of meaningless politics, worse still nobody seems to do any work. I was told informally that many university staff involved in my project were looking for jobs at alternative universities. The reason no work was being done was because the project was a scam to raise funding, nobody wanted to be a part of it. It was a house of cards and would shortly collapse with me in the middle.

It was about 6 months into my project when politics got me kicked me out of my office, but not the PhD, I just no longer had anywhere to work. I spent a month in isolation in coffee shops and libraries. But I gave up, none of the staff wanted anything to do with me, nobody wanted to help my project but nobody told me to my face, everyone I had worked close with cut off all contact with me. I was so toxic the university had effectively kicked me out without creating a paper trail.

One night I found myself sitting alone in my room, it was winter and I had not spoke to anyone for a month and I knew I had to leave my PhD. In a way I broke down, I had no one to talk to and I had not had a full night sleep since this started over a month ago. My heart was hurting from the stress. Without thinking I walked to A&E and asked for help, they did nothing to help me so I went back to my room. It was now about 5am, I could not sleep. I pack up some stuff and in the dark I walk to the train station to catch a train going to London. I needed to get away but I had nowhere to go.

I got off the train 3 or 4 hours later and as soon as I exit I get a phone call from a member of staff at the university asking how my project is going. Nobody had spoke to me in a month, I guessed that the hospital must have made some phone calls this morning and I was now a wanted man. I answered briefly, said something without committing to anything and said good bye. I turned my phone off, I never liked having one anyway.

I find some free WiFi near the train station and found that most hostels were fully booked, but I found a single bed available at a place called Astor Museum Hostel, right outside the British museum. So I walked there and checked in. It was getting dark so I went out to get food and sat downstairs in the kitchen to eat. I spoke to a woman who was from the USA doing a PhD herself, she was spending 3 months at a London university before moving back.

I go back to my hostel room and as I open the door I see a topless woman, just casually standing there. My first time seeing an actual topless woman. I avert my eyes and start to back out of the room but she apologises grabs my arm and pulls me back in. She was just standing in her underwear, topless, not caring about my presence. She began hand washing underwear in a little ceramic sink the hostel room had. We make small talk about London, she was only here to watch live theatre and had no interest in museums. Sometimes she would watch two theatre plays back to back. The next day I walked around even more museums, no matter how long I spent in London I always seemed to find more things to do.

I spent 3 days in London trying to create a plan for what I would do next. Eventually I decided to withdraw formally from my PhD, it was not a decision I had to make, the university already made it months ago without telling me. But coming to the same conclusion myself was hard. I would leave my PhD spend a few months recovering and then go backpacking around Europe. Not entirely sure how this would work or if I even could do it on my own. The only thing I knew was that I wanted to explore more cities. I went into this knowing it was an act of self destruction, I guess I got what I was looking for.

After 3 days I catch the train back and withdraw from university. When I left for London I was losing my mind but coming back I was the happiest I had been in 6 months. But what would I do with my time, I did not like the idea of going backpacking in December, I started reading books. I spent 2 months reading books for 8 hours a day, books on all different topics. But I also did not speak to anyone for those 2 months. My sleep cycle changed so much that I was not going to bed until 6am. I was given some sleeping pills from a walk in centre in the city. I had never tried sleeping pills before and quickly realised they could be very addictive. I also remember walking into a Samaritans Centre just to talk to someone, but they were completely unwelcoming, I was asked to leave after 2 minutes because they wanted lunch.

Eventually I unravelled my life in the city, cleared out my room and had closing meetings with some of the people I had worked with at university. I found people who dodged me while I was a student now wanted to catch up after enough time had passed. Then I left the city for good and started my travels.

Liverpool - 19/02/2017 - 23/02/2017

My time backpacking in the UK has been remarkably over shadowed in my thoughts. My trip started in Liverpool, not far from home, but I had never before travelled far from home. I took the train to Liverpool from the centre of a nearby city, it was a short train trip. I got off at Lime Street train station and it was a short walk to the hostel I had booked into. It was called Hatters Hostel, I checked in and found the hostel was empty. I had a bed in a 12 bed room with nobody else booked in, it would stay like this all week.

The hostel also had a number of cats, one kept trying to come into my room. Being the only guest in my room I had some responsibility not to let it get locked in.

Liverpool has some great sights to see, I spent the first day going to some museums and exploring the city. Several are located right next to Lime Street station, including the World Museum and the Walker Art Gallery. I then headed towards the docks, I had not seen the sea for 10 years so the first chance I got I took it. I tried to go into the Tate art gallery, but they wanted to take my backpack and I could not be bothered, I was getting hungry and tired anyway.

I started to head back to the hostel, stopping off at KFC. I got back to the hostel and met a frizzy haired Spanish woman named Esther. She was living in the hostel while trying to find a job in Liverpool doing bar or catering work. I believe she was about 21 years old, quite thin, somewhat eccentric looking. Her English was poor, all around poor, speaking, hearing and writing so I tried to help her out with her CV. I remember it had lots of grammatical/ structural problems, sentences that did not read correctly and words used for peculiar purposes. I gave it a half hearted attempt, but I knew it would take too much effort and any changes I did make she would not understand why I had made them.

I spent the whole of the next day in Liverpool's Central public library. Liverpool has one of the best public libraries I have seen on my travels, lots of casual seating over multiple floors and a curious large circular building with very strange acoustics. Every sound echoes around the room, making the sounds feel closer than they are, forcing you to be as quiet as possible because you know everyone is listening to you.

I spent most of the day sitting on the floor reading books about Buddhism, one of the reasons why I decided to travel was pulled directly from religion. I had done some reading on the topic and found all major religions have some aspect of long term travel, from Jesus, Guru Nanak and the Buddha. For some reason this spoke to me at the time. I also met a woman sitting on the floor (the library was very busy and had no chairs available). I joined her for a few hours until her friend came and picked her up.

I walked back to the hostel, confused as to what I was doing in Liverpool, confused at why I wanted to throw myself around Europe. Maybe this was not the right decision for me to make. I was alone, the only person I had really met so far could barely speak English and I had not even left England yet. What would other countries be like?

Back at the hostel, they were having a free food night, I think it was pork and rice cooked by some of the staff members. Everyone in the hostel gathered around the kitchen like homeless at a soup kitchen, ready to throw down over anything free. I ate the food with Esther, the woman I met earlier. To my disappointment and surprise she invited her Australian "fling"? I'm not even remotely sure what their relationship was, they must have met recently at the hostel with the understanding the relationship would only last at most 2 weeks. Yet they behaved in a way that created the expectation of a future for them both, which seemed highly unlikely. Whatever it was they had a problem. She could understand my British English okay but could barely understand a word of Australian English. She was trying to use me as a translator.

The Australian guy was rough and outgoing, not tall or big but created a big presence. He wore a sleeveless vest like he was still in the Australia heat. He told me he recently lost his driving license after falling asleep at the wheel in the middle of the Australian outback and in turn lost his job, so he said fuck it and went backpacking in Europe. He was planning on eventually working in hostels in eastern Europe. I had less and less of an idea what the relationship between these two was or what future they had.

I spent a few hours reading my book and went to bed in my empty dormitory.

After eating I went back to the common room up stairs. There I met a German woman, mid 30s, wearing a large amount of bulky clothing, woolly gloves, scarf and a large stuffy coat. She told me she had come to the UK to make a post apocalyptic film on Brexit as the UK had recently voted to leave. She had some very extreme opinions on the issue. She told me that we were all going to starve because we won't be able to import food and she seemed to be genuine in this view. I tried to explain why I doubt Brexit will lead to something as extreme as famine, but I could not convince her. Maybe we should all start growing fruit and veg in our gardens.

The next day after hostel breakfast I decided to go and see the Liverpool Cathedral, the Anglican one. I remember it was near Liverpool's China Town, which was quite small. The cathedral on the other hand was huge, I hear the biggest in the UK. I also spent a lot of time walking around the graveyard and then back to China Town. I went back to the Hostel with plans to go to another museum later in the day.

I got back to the hostel and met a black woman named Anna, in her early 30s from Scotland who had come to Liverpool for a job interview. She spoke with a strong accent but it was not a Scottish one, I believe she was born outside of the UK and for some reason decided to relocate to Aberdeen of all places. After speaking with her for an hour, together with another guy we decided to go to a Museum. The Museum of Liverpool, it was a big building that I walked past a few days ago. The whole time the woman was taking selfies, must have been over 50 selfies, she told me she would only post the best one on Facebook. I had never met anyone who took so many photos of themselves. We spent a few hours walking around and then went back to the hostel. She seemed to be flirting a lot, touching my arms, hugging me, it was hot! She was obviously a little wild but I was not sure what to do.

She told me more about her job interview, to me it sounded like a scam, that she had come all the way to Liverpool for nothing. They had invited her back to a 2nd interview, but on the next day! So she needed somewhere to stay to prepare for tomorrow. We agreed to meet up tomorrow afternoon,

once she had completed her 2nd interview. She followed me to my empty room, I sat down on my bed but she hesitated, spoke for a while and walked back out. Looking back on it she was clearly trying to get me to initiate something in the empty hostel room.

The next day I woke up early, I was originally planning on spending a few days in Manchester but the hostel in Liverpool was so good (and empty) that I decided to just have a day trip. I took the train to Manchester Victoria and right in front was Manchester Cathedral. I had a busy day, I went to the Manchester Museum and then the Science and Industry Museum. After the museums I walked back to the centre I then walked to The John Rylands Library to do a few hours of reading. I met two very nerdy looking women who were using the library to study for university. One of the women had a very nice looking SIGG water bottle that I complimented her on.

I then headed back to the train station and went back to Liverpool. At the hostel I met with the woman from the day before, she told me that the job was not for her and that she would go back home tomorrow. I knew it must have been a scam doing door to door sales or something similar and I imagine she was very disappointed. It was getting dark but I still wanted to see Liverpool's Catholic Cathedral, the one that looks like a UFO. She agreed to come with me, the weather was taking a turn for the worse and winds were up, a sign of things to come. We walked to the cathedral but it was locked, as expected. But I still got to say I went to see both cathedrals (a year later I would go see inside it to!).

I went to bed, going to Glasgow tomorrow but I hear on the news that a storm is coming.

Glasgow - 23/02/2017 - 26/02/2017

I woke up, had hostel breakfast and then made my way down to Liverpool Lime Street for the last time. The weather was bad, wind and rain, I remember standing outside Lime Street station being able to lean into the wind and not fall down. All the rubbish and leaves were being blown back and forth. The news had talked about a storm that was coming in today. The man at the information desk said my train was delayed, I went up to an information screen and watched as it was delayed over and over again. Then my train was cancelled. I went to the information desk again and I was told to go to the other side of the station and catch a different train. The information desk said today was going to be a busy day, I was advised against travel and that I might not make it to Scotland today. I ignored his warnings.

I went to the platform, here I met a man who was heading to Carlisle on the border with Scotland. We were both told to catch any train we can going north. We sat on a train together, we talked for 20 minutes before the train eventually departed. He owned a series of Fish and Chip shops, he made it sound like an interesting business. He asked me where I was headed so I told him about my planned European tour, still not sure I would carry it out. He was very encouraging of the idea, unlike my parents.

The train got to Preston, only about an hour outside of Liverpool. We were all told to depart as this train had also been cancelled, debris on the tracks. I waited in Preston for 30 minutes, I was told by the staff to just jump on any train I wanted, tickets didn't mean anything today. I was told to catch a train to Edinburgh, it was close enough to Glasgow I thought. But then I was told about another train, one that may get to Glasgow directly. So I took the risk and jumped on board.

The train set off and went all the way to Carlisle, the station in Preston was hectic and I had lost contact with the man I met on the original train. Most of the staff in Preston were telling people to catch different trains, or whatever train that was not cancelled. The situation was so chaotic it made me think of Berlin in the last months of WW2.

We crossed the border to Scotland and the train went through some mountains, all snow covered. This was the first time I had left England in 10 years and I celebrated with some people sitting next to me. It was really snowing in Scotland. The train eventually got to Glasgow, several hours later than I planned. The weather in Glasgow was quiet, not much wind, I guessed the storm had passed. The sun was setting and I was tired from travelling, I did not do anything in Glasgow city centre and walked straight to the hostel, one called the Tartan Lodge.

I checked in and met a German woman who was staying in the same room as me, she was sitting cross legged on her bed wearing very small shorts, we spoke briefly then I went down stairs to watch Netflix on my laptop. I cooked pasta in the little kitchen provided by the hostel, the common room had a very awkward vibe. Lots of people staying in the hostel were in fact workers, builders, electricians and a woman from eastern Europe that told me she did "Massages". It seemed I was one of the few actual travellers. I went to bed without really speaking to anyone.

The next day I woke up and headed towards the city centre, Glasgow like Liverpool has lots of museums. The hostel was also located right next to the Glasgow Necropolis Cemetery, a cemetery on top of a hill. Apparently the word Necropolis in Greek means city of the dead. I spent an hour walking up and then down to the other side, I did not recognise any of the names on the graves. I had a long walk to the Riverside Museum, and spent a few hours there. It had lots of cars and a model street of Glasgow, outside was a big ship you could walk around. I then headed to the Kelvingrove museum, probably my favourite museum in Glasgow. Finally I was told that Glasgow university was worth going to see, lots of old buildings and yet another museum called the Hunterian Museum. I then got food and headed back to the hostel.

The next day I decided to spend all day in what I believe was Mitchell Library, a large public Library in the city. I remember it was okay, quite large, but the upper floors seemed very dated. I went back to the hostel, I did not meet anyone.

The next day I would go to Edinburgh.

Edinburgh - 26/02/2017 - 01/03/2017

I woke up in Glasgow and walked back to the train station, I spent 3 days in Glasgow and did not meet anyone. But Edinburgh was the more interesting city, or so I was told. I bought a train ticket and knowing that the train only takes about 1 hour, I did no planning. I very quickly arrived in Edinburgh Waverley station, the weather had changed completely, instead of the wind and rain from the storm it was hot and sunny. Despite it being Scotland in February the sun was beating down upon my pale skin, I had to use sun cream.

The city was busy, I went into the McDonald's right next to the train station. Here you will notice how often I end up in McDonald's, but free WiFi and cheap food are a good choice when travelling. I almost never eat a full meal, sometimes I just get a coffee, other times I will have a wrap or amazingly a salad. I oriented myself in the city and found that I had to get to the other side of the train station, the train tracks felt like a river running through the city.

The hostel was called the Castle Rock Hostel named so as it was opposite from Edinburgh Castle. I walked down towards the castle and crossed the train tracks near the Scottish National Gallery. The other side of the tracks required alot of uphill walking, the buildings were darker this side of the city, the roads were cobbled rather than tarmac. I was surprised at how many international tourists were in the city, only in London had I seen so many. I never see tourists where I live.

I arrived at the hostel, and checked in. It was a very large hostel in an excellent location in the city. Inside it was decorated to look like a castle, with suits of armour and shields. I walked around the hostel for a while, it was like a maze, every corridor looked the same and corridors would branch off in unique, unexpected ways. I found my room dumped my bag and went back outside to go see the National Gallery.

Walking back down I spent the rest of the daylight hours in the National Gallery and The Royal Scottish Academy, both buildings are next to each other. I then walked back to the streets near the hostel, I believe the area is known as the Royal Mile or the Old Town. I walked around until I found a super market and bought some food to cook in the hostel.

On the way back two women walked past me, one with her backpack wide open and all her stuff was hanging out. She clearly had not noticed so I caught up with her. She thanked me and we started talking for about half an hour. I was the same age as the two women, and we noticed how our lives were the total opposite from each other. They had both done nothing but have fun and travel since leaving school 10 years ago, I had done nothing but work. Now they were having to find a way to settle down and make money and I was having to learn how to have fun. We said bye and I went back to cook some food and make coffee.

Back at the hostel an American woman was also cooking in the kitchen, she told me how she was just coming to the end of her 3 month trip around Europe. She spoke about how she had treated herself to a hotel room for her last night but did not want to leave the hostel yet. I look back now and realise she may have been inviting me back to her hotel room, using the hostel to try and meet a man, but at the time I was oblivious.

I also met a Chinese woman who was also travelling long term, but she was in her early 30s. She asked me a curious question, can Europeans recognise which country a person comes from just by the persons face. I did not think so, especially in western Europe, maybe this changes the further you travel. She seemed surprised by my answer, like she thought all Europeans look alike to her but maybe we see each other differently. I read for a while in the common room and went to bed.

The next day I woke up, had hostel breakfast, and then walked to the National Museum of Scotland. It was not far from the hostel, when I got there they were evacuating the museum. I think a fire alarm went off, I waited for about 45 minutes before I was let in. A large queue had haphazardly gathered by the entrance. It was a rush when they eventually opened the doors.

I had an interesting time in the museum, I found the worst and most inefficient way possible to display museum pieces. They had places objects within boxes in statues, I found it such a bad example of design I still think to myself why did they do that.

I also found a huge human hamster wheel, I climbed in with an elderly couple watching me I ran in it. I found it difficult to stop once I got up to speed and crashed on the floor of the wheel, hurting my side. It was a stupid life choice, at the time I thought Scotland was really far from home and I did not know how I would get back being injured. On the upper floors I started a conversation with a member of staff at the museum, a Woman from eastern Europe. She was working in uniform at the museum, and wanted to know where I was from, she had never heard my accent before. She said it was exotic, she had got bored of everyone sounding Scottish. I asked her when she finished and invited her out to lunch, but she said she was too busy. I asked for recommendations nearby and she gave me a few options of cafes where the museum staff often go. I left the museum and found one of her options and had lunch there.

I then made my way to Edinburgh Castle, it is a long walk up to the castle and the dark black stone cobbles are in places smooth as marble. Despite it being the main tourist attraction walking up felt more risky than it should have been, the winds were also quite strong on the exposed footpath. I spent a few hours here, walking around the many museums inside. I then headed back to the hostel.

Back in the hostel my room had been taken over by some French men, a large group had moved into our shared room. They all spoke very little English, almost non in fact. I had difficulty communicating with them even when using hand signals and it made me think about how difficult even Paris will be to travel around.

Two Dutch women had also moved into the room, Naomi and Rosemarie. We spoke briefly and to my relief they both spoke very good English, unlike the French group. They were both about 20 years old travelling together to see Scotland. They seemed like really nice people, like hard working, genuine people. We also met a Scottish man who lived in Glasgow but studied in Edinburgh, he found it easier to just stay in the hostel rather than rent a room in the city. We all decided to go into the common room together.

One thing I had still yet to do was get drunk, I had been looking for a chance or for someone to invite me. But It was already quite late and I was not in the mood, neither were the other people. We spoke about religion, relationships and how important it is to have sex. I had talked about my failures with women and relationships, but never talked about my inexperience. I went to bed soon after, I had planned for a lot of walking tomorrow.

I woke up, had hostel breakfast and then set off on my walk, I had planned to walk all the way to the top of Arthur's Seat. First I walked to the top of Calton Hill, I did not plan my route and just noticed a large hill in the distance and walked towards it. The wealth of the city had surprised me as I had expected the city to be poorer. The film Trainspotting showed Edinburgh as being downtrodden, full of crime and hard drugs, but after being here it was so much wealthier than where I lived.

From Calton Hill I walked down to the Scottish Parliament Building, I went inside, they checked my backpack and briefly walked around the building. Then I started the walk up to the top of Arthur's Seat. It was still very muddy from all the raining of the recent storm and my shoes were running shoes, almost totally flat on the bottom. On the way up I fell over 3 or 4 times, and got covered in mud. I spent a few hours walking around the hill and went back to the hostel, it was about 4pm and I was exhausted so I did some reading.

After a few hours I met an American woman who invited me out to a "Bar Crawl" later that night. I said yes, obviously. A woman invites me out on a bar crawl, a woman invites me out anywhere I obviously say yes! She had noticed me from the hostel in Glasgow but we never spoke but she said I looked very "memorable". We spoke for a few hours then I departed to the hostel room to get ready where I met both the Dutch women. I invited them out but they declined as they were taking a flight back home tomorrow. I did not quite know what a "Bar Crawl" entailed exactly, I had never even been to a bar.

I went to the meeting point and met with the other people going, I was only the 2nd man out of about 15 people. The only other man going was actually running the bar crawl, he was Australian a tall big man with a large bushy beard, he acted very nonchalantly as if he had done this a thousand times before. We walked to the first bar and it was like a cave, very small and underground, maybe a very old converted cellar. The bar was having a quiz, I walked to the bar and ordered a pint of cider because that's what I was told to do by the Australian. I had never drank cider before. We sat on the table and I told everyone this was my first time drinking in a bar, which it was. All the American women were surprised and nobody understood how, they all thought I must be 18 years old but I was older than the Australian man.

We played at the quiz and I drank my pint. I remember getting drunk and then progressively tired, despite only drinking a pint I was beginning to fall asleep in the first bar. Arms crossed on the table with my head resting on them. Everyone on the bar crawl started laughing at me and the Australian guy said he would take me back to the hostel. But I was okay walking back on my own and I called a very early end to my first bar crawl. Walking back alone in a strange city is something I would later become very used to doing. What a funny story I thought to myself.

I woke up and had hostel breakfast for the last time in Scotland. I said bye to the Dutch women, a few hours after they left I found a hand written letter from them tucked away in my bed. They wanted me to add them on Facebook to discuss religion and travelling more.

I was planning on going to York next, but I decided against it. York for some reason seemed expensive and I really just wanted to get going onto Paris. So I took a train all the way back home and brought an end to my travels in my own country.

London to Paris - 05/03/2017 - 07/03/2017

*"He's a twentieth century boy
With his hands on the rails
Trying not to be sick again
And holding on for tomorrow*

*London ice cracks on a seamless line
He's hanging on for dear life
And so we hold each other tightly
And hold on for tomorrow"*
— **Blur, For Tomorrow**

After my venture north I spent two weeks recovering and procrastinating. I found that I did not need as many clothes as I took to Scotland but I found that everything else I took worked out well. A Chinese woman I went to university with had unexpectedly came back to the UK so I organised to meet her before I left. I also had a few things I needed to tie up like bank accounts and travel insurance.

I was slower than expected in getting everything sorted out, but a single event drove me to leave. I was walking down the stairs at night, like normal I had not turned the lights on as I did not want to wake anyone up. But on the last few steps I slipped, I could not grab onto anything and the back of my neck hit one of the steps really hard. My mom had left a pile of clothes on the last few steps and I thought they almost killed me. It was a bad omen, I decided that I needed to leave fast.

I would depart for Paris from London, I liked London and it is still my favourite city in Europe for museums. So I decided to spend a full day in London to visit a few things. Plus I knew the bus to Paris would be 8 - 10 hours and I wanted to set off early.

I booked my bus ticket to Paris before I set off, I was travelling using National Express. I could have taken a train to Paris but the tickets are really expensive if you don't book months in advanced. I arrived in London and walked to the Hostel Clink78, I had been here 6 months before and enjoyed my time.

I immediately met a tall blonde Finnish woman named Maiju who was sleeping on the bed above mine. She was trying to find a job in London and had been living in hostels for the last month. She had a cold or the flu and being that ill in a hostel did not look fun, no space or privacy, not even knowing what your rights are for free healthcare. I thought to myself at some point in the next 3 months I will be in the same position as she is now. She was about 30 years old and I thought she was cute, especially with sniffling nose. We spoke for a bit and decided to go out and get food, we walked out and went to a supermarket, it was already dark outside. We bought some food and cooked it together in the hostel kitchen.

The hostel is named Clink because it was apparently at some point a prison or jail, it still retains some of the original locked doors. The common room is actually a court room with stands for the judge.

She was working on her CV so I offered to review it for her. She had a strange CV, never had a job longer than 6 months and she had a photo of herself on the first page. I advised her to take off the photo, it is not something we normally have on CVs in the UK. She wanted to keep it as she thought having blonde hair would help her, I thought it might but companies can be cautious with discrimination laws.

I'm not sure what I did for most of the next day, I think I went to a museum but I can't be sure. One thing that I know I did was go and see the Peter Pan statue in the Kensington Gardens. The Dutch woman Naomi who wrote me a letter in Edinburgh wanted me to take a photo of it, she must have thought I was like Peter Pan, an eternal child. My memories are already fading, especially about my time in the UK. On the evening I met a woman and we got a beer in the hostel bar as I wanted to get drunk again.

The next day I woke up and quietly packed up my stuff. I said good bye to the sleeping Finnish woman on the bed above me by giving one of her toes a poke, her feet that were awkwardly hanging off the end of her bed almost blocking the door! Then I walked to Victoria Coach Station. I had to wait an hour for my coach as I wanted to get here early. Surprisingly a bus to Paris only cost me about £13! As the bus arrived I separated out my backpack by putting all my valuables in a carry on. My big backpack had a baggage tag of an M&M, given to me by a Chinese family that are friends of my parents.

I boarded the coach, it sat there for a few minutes and departed. It was almost empty with maybe only 8 people on board so I had two seats to myself. It did not take long to get to Dover/ Folkestone which is where the Channel Tunnel starts, the 3rd longest train tunnel in the world I believe. We stopped to let a few more passengers on before it departed for France. The coach drove onto a train and the train departed with the coach on board.

At Calais we stopped to let more people on board and then quickly got on our way to Paris. By the time we arrived in Paris it was late, about 10pm and being March it was pitch black. I arrived in Paris near a place called Bagnolet on the outskirts of the Paris ring road. My first time leaving the British Isles in 10 years and the only time I had left on my own. I had no data and I could not find WiFi but I knew the general direction of the hostel, it was located near Belleville and was called the "The Loft Boutique Hostel".

I walked towards the hostel using a cached version of Google Maps on my phone. The walk took about an hour, I knew I was in a different country, everything was priced in Euros and all the signs were in French. I was unsure if I could speak to people or if they would understand English, how would I react to people that can't understand me? How will I buy food, or ask for help at the Hostel. Paris was a big city and I had spent my entire life living in a village! I really felt alone, I asked myself what I was doing in Paris over and over again. I got to the hostel but the door was locked, I rang the bell and I was let in by the receptionist. My own grand tour had started.

Paris - 07/03/2017 - 12/03/2017

"If I could wake up in a different place, at a different time, could I wake up as a different person?"

— **Chuck Palahniuk, Fight Club**

I walked into my hostel room and right next to the entrance was a wacky, early 20s French Canadian woman, she grabbed my arm and pulled me a little closer. She quietly warned me of an Irish man I was going to be sleeping next to a few beds down. I found my bed and went to put my bag away and she was probably right to warn me, but he seemed more awkward than dangerous. He was in his late 40s, overweight and obviously heavily drunk, travelling on his own and walking about our shared room completely naked. He in turn, sitting down naked on his bed, leaned over and quietly warned me of the French Canadian woman. Apparently she was keeping a very large serrated knife under her pillow and he was really concerned for the both of us. It probably says something about my open nature that I was not apprehensive about either of them.

Me and the French Canadian woman went to sit in the common room together, two American women who clearly knew the French Canadian woman also came to sit with us after a few minutes. The French Canadian woman spoke and she sounded annoyed, like she wanted to speak to me alone. We discussed travelling, they were all experienced travellers where as I was nervous and on edge just sitting in the hostel. They were having these interesting conversations about hitch hiking and taking trains around Europe. The wacky French Canadian woman described her hitch hiking trip where she travelled alone across the entire width of Canada. When sitting with the two American women her wackiness was magnified. Every so often I tried to interrupt the adventurous conversation with boring practical questions, like how to get to the Eiffel Tower. The three women were all leaving tomorrow at different times. I was hungry but it was already late so I went to bed.

The Irish guy was still in bed, his large naked body half exposed from under the paper thin, almost translucent bed sheet. He tried to talk to me even as I was trying to sleep, every few minutes he would loudly flatulate as he spoke. What a terrible night, but thankfully he was flying to Dublin tomorrow.

My first day backpacking I was obsessed with security, I made sure to lock everything up, even my clothes. When I left the hostel on the first day I carried all my valuables, laptop, passport and I even used a money belt. This was the only time I used that money belt, for the next three months it would stay at the bottom of my backpack slowly filling up with shrapnel. What do you do on your first day in Paris? Climb the Eiffel Tower of course.

I had hostel breakfast and then walked to the nearest metro station, the one called Belleville. The area looked like it was in China Town. I had no idea how to pay for stuff in Paris or how the Metro worked, I tried to use a machine but I did not know the difference between all the tickets. I went to the Kiosk and the woman did not speak a word of English, I did not know what to do. An aggressive man was trying to sell tickets or something in the station and I tried to avoid him. I decided my best bet was to go back to the hostel and do some research on Paris as I had done none whatsoever and I was panicking. Besides it was still very early in the day. Back at the hostel I read

up on how to use the metro and I found the type of ticket I needed to buy, so after an hour I headed back to the station.

I purchased a package of tickets that I believed would last me the 5 days that I was staying here and jumped on a train. I would use the metro in Paris quite a lot and I liked the small tickets you would be given. I escaped the metro near the Arc de Triomphe, walked around for a bit and then went to the McDonald's nearby. Police or private security guarded the entrance and checked my bag just to go into McDonald's! I remember the prices being very expensive compared to the UK. I got a coffee and then slowly walked down to the Eiffel Tower.

I walked up the stairs to the top. I then walked across the river again and walked down passed the Louvre Museum and finally crossed over a bridge to walk passed Notre Dame cathedral. I then went to McDonald's again near the metro station Hôtel de Ville and caught the metro back to the hostel.

Once there the two American women and Irish man were all gone and the French Canadian woman was just leaving, no longer interested in speaking to or even acknowledging me. Moving towards the back of the dormitory where I was sleeping I notice someone had taken the Irish man's bed. A short dark haired woman with large round glasses of unclear ancestry; her shirt sleeves were rolled up displaying her tattooed forearms. When I came over she was still unpacking her oversized Osprey backpack which was, along with her clothes and belongings sprawled over the floor.

She told me her name was Daisy, that she was 26 years old and Mexican American. Although she looked somewhat more like South East Asian. She explained how she either lost or was pickpocketed for her mobile phone somewhere else in France and had to stay in Paris until her new phone was posted to her from the USA. She was travelling around Europe for 3 months. I told her that I was also planning on travelling around Europe for 3 months and she congratulated me, as if I had joined an exclusive club.

On her bed was a large chefs knife wrap filled with kitchen knives! I asked her about them and she said she was a chef and that she carried them everywhere with her. She did not intend to work as a chef in Europe but brought them just incase. Daisy, a woman who I would bet has re-read her copy of Kitchen Confidential so many times the pages had started to fall out.

We walked together to a nearby Carrefour supermarket, so far I had only purchased food in McDonald's because it was easy to understand. But a supermarket was harder, I ended up purchasing some soup in a carton but I don't know what kind of soup it was. I tried to use the Google translator app to read the packaging but it was only accurate enough to give me an idea. You point the camera at the writing and it tries to rewrite it in your chosen language, an interesting feature but I never used it again. We went back to the hostel ate food and eventually I went to bed.

The next day I had hostel breakfast and feeling more confident I walked again to the Belleville metro station. I spent the whole of the day strolling around the Louvre, a huge museum similar to the British museum, I guess it needs no introduction. It contains the Mona Lisa painting and a large number of marble sculptures. I never went to museums before I went travelling as I never had the opportunity. I was fascinated that I could go and see actual history, objects created by people 1,000s of years ago. After visiting so many museums the effect has worn off; back then I was like a child on the world's biggest school trip.

On the evening I spoke to Daisy. She was not as active as me, spent much of her time in the hostel and did not travel far. I doubt many people were as active as me though, I was easily walking 20 miles a day.

The next day was almost exactly the same as the last. I spent the day going to museums, this time the Musée d'Orsay and exploring more of Paris. On the evening I went with Daisy to get food, we ended up just buying microwave meals at carrefour, they were expensive compared to the UK. She ordered a beer from the hostel bar but I still did not feel comfortable buying or drinking beer, especially in a foreign country. I did not understand the different types of beer, when it was socially acceptable to drink or the etiquette of buying beer at a bar.

We then went for a walk around the area and found a small local art gallery. At the time I had this "Sketch" where I would make a stupid, complicated and slightly nefarious scheme to achieve something really small and petty. Just as we walk in I say to her:

"We will pretend to be Major Art Dealers from London who are looking to purchase fabulous pieces of art here in Paris. This will let us bypass any queues and give us access to conversations with the hosts."

Daisy's face screwed up, but before she could respond I introduced us as Art Dealers to the man on the door. Perfect Timing, now she had to run with it.

We walk in but the art gallery is really small. I try to have an interesting conversation with one of the hosts but it does not go anywhere. As we are exiting Daisy almost destroys a €30,000 painting with her large backpack. We briskly walk out.

My final full day in Paris I spent reading, I had not yet done any reading in Paris so I walked to the Sainte-Geneviève Library. I did not know if it would be open to the public like UK libraries but with the little research that I did I thought it was my best chance. I got to the entrance and it had this huge queue and despite being English I actually hate queues and always try to avoid them. I attempted to speak to someone in the queue to confirm my suspicions that it was to enter the library, but they did not speak good enough English to understand me. Or maybe I did not speak good enough French, or any French at all. I looked around for somewhere else to read, the weather was good so I decided on the nearby Luxembourg Gardens.

I found a nice fountain called the Medici Fountain which had some chairs, I took a few and used one as a foot stool. The weather was really sunny but the area had enough cover to read my kindle. I started reading a huge book which was a Biography on Lenin, it would take me about a month to eventually finish reading it.

By evening I was back at the hostel where I found Daisy sitting on a little kitchen table eating a kebab out of a takeaway box. I asked her where she got it from and she said a shop just up the street. I still did not have much confidence talking to people in Paris due to the language barrier. I was also not used to buying food, I could handle McDonald's and supermarkets but even back home I would never really buy food anywhere else. I felt I should give it a try, besides I had never had a kebab before and microwave soup as healthy as it is did not entice me.

So I went on a small adventure to find this kebab shop and I came back to the hostel not quite knowing what I had ordered. I sat down next to Daisy and started eating, we planned later to go to a

bar. Daisy then started talking to another American woman who was looking lonely, the other woman was about 20 years old, very slender and looking agitated. She was also looking for food, so we both told her about this kebab shop and off she went. She came back 10 minutes later with yet another American woman! She was not as slender and appropriately the other woman had found her in the kebab shop. She was 19 years old. Now I was sitting and eating the last crumbs of my kebab with 3 American women, all of which wanted a wild night out in Paris and were seemingly expecting me to be the one to give it them!

We invited them out and after finishing our kebabs we went to a little bar near the hostel called "Culture Rapide", we sat outside on some plastic chairs because it was heaving with people inside. Sitting in the open the temperature was still hot despite being dark, this was likely only refreshing to me as the 3 American women were all used to it. Both of the new American women were younger than me and Daisy, the slender one was studying in Morocco and discussed her attempts at dating Moroccan men. I think and the other one was working in Paris as an au pair and told a story about sneaking into a boys house to have sex with him. We spoke for a while, the American women all kept talking about previous relationships and one night stands. I again spoke jokingly about my lack of success with relationships and women. I knew that the older woman was bisexual and they all seemed to have long and interesting histories.

After an hour one of the younger women started frantically swiping men on tinder, the other held my arm and whispered to me:

"I will let you do anything you want with me tonight!"

I thought what a strange situation I have found myself in.

I remember making a joke about how the previous night me and Daisy went on a date to an art gallery. The joke being that it was not a date, I said it with the intention of embarrassing her. Her face screwed up in the same way it had the previous night.

After drinking an almost pint (500ml) of beer and most of a 2nd, just like in Edinburgh I started to get visibly drunk. The women noticed and Daisy grabbed the glass of what was left of my 2nd beer and downed it in one go. They did not want me going back to the hostel yet. We left the bar and started to walk, apparently one of the women knew a "club" nearby. So I blindly followed the three women, I was amused at myself walking while so drunk. I commented on the fact that although I was drunk if I focused with enough concentration I could pull myself out of the drunk state.

I was being thoroughly led by these women, up and down streets crowded with party goers. I was thoroughly disoriented, and normally I pride myself on knowing where I am. We must have been walking for almost an hour before we found some random bar that the women believed was suitable. I have no idea where this place was or what it was called but they were playing some sort of Spanish music and everyone was dancing. The song "Despacito" was apparently quite popular at the time. I walked in and had no clue what I was supposed to do. People were all on top of each other and on top of me, personal space was left at the door. I did not know where to put my coat, all the chairs and tables were taken with literal piles of clothes. I must have looked very awkward standing there trying to find a place for my coat so Daisy grabbed it off me and put it on an already taken chair. I guess it was a free for all.

I think I ordered another almost pint and the women tried to get me to dance, but I had not danced since I was a child. Given the situation and my newly discovered disposition to try everything at least once I managed to dance, poorly. I did not understand how everyone could dance so well, everyone seemed to have rhythm and knew exactly what moves look good. Several months later in Krakow it would be explained to me by an Australian woman that people are only good at dancing because they practice dance moves in front of a mirror. Daisy told me to try her drink, it was some sort of cocktail but I had no idea what.

The two younger American women were aggressively eyeing every man in the club, trying to catch the eyes of a man. At the time I knew almost nothing about one night stands, it struck me as very sexually aggressive and even to me the signals were obvious. Despite their attempts they seemed to have no luck. I remember the bar to my excitement played "Baggy Trousers" by the Madness, none of the women had heard it before and didn't believe someone would write a song called "Baggy Trousers".

After a few hours the women wanted to go to a new club as I believe this one was about to close. We stepped outside but I had enough, it was already late, maybe 3am and I had no idea where we were. On top of this I also had to catch a bus at 9am to Brussels, I already knew I was going to be messed up tomorrow and wanted to try and minimise the damage. So I said goodbye to the women, who all looked very sorry to see me go, they offered to walk me back but I did not want to spoil their night.

Just as I turned away I said to Daisy:

"I hope you get laid tonight!"

As I turn around to walk alone into the night I hear one of the women say:

"So he was not interested in you after all."

But knowing Daisy was Bisexual and having a pretty strong feeling about the other two women leaning that way I knew it would provoke some kind of reaction. But what exactly I could only guess.

So very very drunk I thrust myself into the night to try and find my hostel with my phone battery almost dead. Without Google maps I knew I would have major problems. The streets were alive with drunks and I was accosted on two separate occasions by female prostitutes for the first time in my life. After about 40 minutes I had made it to the hostel. I put my phone on charge and went to bed.

After being in bed for 15 minutes not able to sleep, I think alcohol actually keeps me awake. Daisy together with the slender 20 year old woman burst into our shared hostel room, laughing and giggling. I knew something was up and my heart was racing, not quite sure what to do. I was conflicted because I did not want to spoil what privacy they thought they had in a shared hostel room....

So the moaning started and at first I thought this is awesome! But I sat there in silence and after 20 minutes trying to ignore it I was getting fed up. It was now about 4:30am and I still had a bus to catch in 4 hours time! I jumped up and interrupted the American women to tell them I was going

outside to watch Netflix, I averted my eyes and tried not to look in their direction. Startled, the American women apologised, laughed and then carried on.

I went outside to the common room, it was totally dark and completely empty. I made conversation with the guy on reception, he reminded me of Shaggy from Scooby Doo with his loosing fitting shirt and scruffy facial hair. I told him why I was having difficulty sleeping and at first he was very annoyed and wanted to stop them but I told him to just leave them, he said Nice! We spoke about both of our travel plans for about 20 minutes. Then I watched Netflix for a few hours in the common room, on my own, in my boxer shorts.

After two hours I thought they would have finished, so I went back in and nope. It turns out lesbians take a long time to finish having sex. Just as I walked in, one I guess "Finished"? I made a joke about offering them some coffee and they went to sleep. The sun was now coming up in the hostel room and I gave up all hope of sleeping myself so I went back into the common room to watch Netflix until 7am.

At 7am I decided to pack up my bags, I wrote a note for Daisy to add me on Facebook knowing we were both travelling in the same direction. The cleaner had just came into the common room and had started laying out hostel breakfast, so I ate and then left the hostel. I travelled to the Belleville metro station for the last time and went all the way to a bus station called Porte Maillot near the Arc de Triomphe. Sleep deprived and confused I waited for my bus.

Brussels - 12/03/2017 - 14/03/2017

"How ya gonna keep 'em down on the farm After they've seen Paree"

— **Joe Young**

I waited at the bus station for a while as the bus was an hour late. Every time a new bus drove on I would walk up to it and check the sign on the front of the bus. So many other people were waiting that I was not able to find anyone else catching the same bus. The weather was cooler than it had been for the last 5 days, no sun and the sky full of clouds. I had packed for both hot and cold weather, packing both my favourite dark olive green woolly jumper and a formal black wool coat, the same coat I used to wear with a suit to the office. I knew I was likely to have to deal with both hot and cold weather on my trip. Also, these were not the kind of clothes people normally go long term backpacking in but they kept me warm.

The bus eventually arrived, the driver scanned the app on my phone and I boarded. This would be the first time I caught a FlixBus after taking advice from Daisy, she believed this was the cheapest way to travel. It was a long trip to Brussels and I did not speak to anyone. I spent the time processing what had happened the night before spending hours day dreaming out of the window. I hoped that Daisy would find my written note, packing up and leaving a hostel is a messy job it could have been blown under the desk never to be seen. Maybe she would find it but never bother, I had no control.

On arriving in Brussels near the Brussels North railway station I was impressed by how clean the city looked. Tall shiny buildings, clean roads and also lots of trees and parks. I walked down the pretty looking Boulevard Roi Albert II to the hostel 2GO4. I spoke for a while to the woman on the desk, the first person I had spoke to since the chaos of last night. I checked in and sat in the common room completely exhausted. When you become this sleep deprived your mind feels like glass.

The common room had lots of quirky objects on the walls, it felt claustrophobic and I had to be careful not to knock anything over. I spent an hour catching up with things on my laptop and then headed out to take a quick walk around the city centre. It was late afternoon and I wanted to get food. I remember going to a nearby supermarket called Delhaiz, I bought some snacks, bread, chocolate spread and waffles. I was told to buy waffles while I'm in Belgium. I went back to the hostel, prepared my food and found I had way too many waffles. I left the rest of them in the kitchen for anyone to have.

I sat down on some sofas and two French women started talking to me. I told them of my travel plans and of the chaos last night. They were only in Belgium for a weekend and they invited me out to a club. It was about 7pm and I desperately needed sleep so I gracefully turned down their offer. A 2nd night in a row would have been too much for me, however I have often wondered what would have happened that night if I said yes. Declining their offer also went against my new open to everything philosophy. At around 9pm the hostel common room became quiet, I wanted to keep a regular sleep cycle and 9pm was as late as I could manage to stay awake.

I woke up the next day and had only planned for two nights here so that would mean one full day to explore the city. I wasn't interested in going to museums so I decided to walk around the city. I first went to the city centre as I did not have time to explore there the night before. I got lunch at a place called Exki, an unappetising, artificial looking baguette I did not like. But I ate it anyway on the steps to the Brussels Stock Exchange.

Naomi who I met in Edinburgh wanted me to go see another Peter Pan statue in Brussels so I first started by walking south to Egmont Park. I then circled the whole city and ended up in a place called Laeken Cemetery. It had this huge underground crypt, I had not seen anything like this before or since. I walked around the cemetery for about an hour but did not see anyone else. The crypt looked like it had some construction going on as pipes were running all over the floors. I felt like I was not supposed to be there and they made a mistake by leaving it unlocked. Then I started to get scared in case someone would lock me in down here. I found the exit and headed back to the hostel.

I had a quiet night in the hostel and sat watching Netflix and YouTube videos on my own. I remember going to bed late, the hostel staff kicked me out of the common room.

Antwerp - 14/03/2017 - 16/03/2017

I woke up the next day and walked back to Brussels North train station, I was going to take a train to Antwerp. The trains in Belgium were cheap, short distance and came very regularly. Because of this I didn't have to think about planning my routes. It cost more to take a Flixbus to Antwerp than a train. I got to Antwerp quite early in the day and got off at Station Antwerpen-Centraal. The area around the station felt very strange, almost all of the shops were pawn shops buying and selling gold and diamonds. One of the few places in Europe I saw large groups Orthodox Jews wearing their black wide brimmed hats straight out of the 1600s.

I went for a walk in the city centre for a few hours and then headed back out of the city towards the Antwerp Backpackers Hostel called "ABHostel". As I was walking up the street I was greeted by a middle aged man, he asked if I was checking in but he had not even introduced himself. I had not found the hostel yet, so I asked him to confirm the hostels name and he replies that he is infact the owner. I had not expected the owner of the hostel to be waiting outside for me on the street just to check me in. It felt awkward and concerned me. Either he was eager to be leaving or eager to have a guest.

Inside a man from South Korea greeted me, he was volunteering in the hostel. He seemed to be a strange choice for a hostel worker. In my experience hostel workers are extremely extroverted and outgoing, bouncing around like social butterflies and getting drunk every night. This was a man who to me seemed even nerdier than myself. Tall and uncoordinated with his long limbs he was unsure of how to check me in but with the owners help he muddled through. The hostel itself was a very unusual building, the common room and bar were almost in a basement and everyone seemed to sleep in the same large room upstairs.

I went to get food at a Carrefour supermarket nearby and spent the night watching Netflix on my own. The hostel was almost entirely empty, maybe only another two guests were staying that night. No wonder the man was waiting for me to check in. I remember sitting in the common room basement, alone and in almost total pitch black darkness. It was so dark that when I eventually went to bed I had difficulty navigating the cluttered common room and stairs.

The next day I went to explore Antwerp, from what I saw yesterday I had high hopes as it seemed very different to Brussels. I was first told by the hostel to walk to a place called "Graffiti Wall" and was given a map. I remember listening to Ghostface Killah and his album Twelve Reasons to Die for the first time. So I started the day walking even further outside of town and walked around some abandoned streets. The area had a large amount of walls covered in complicated graffiti. I then walked back to the hostel and then to the docks as I wanted to go and see the MAS Museum (Museum aan de Stroom). I really liked the MAS museum, I walked up to the top and it had a really good selection of exhibits. A giant statue of Buddha was on the first floor if I remember correctly.

I went back into the city and found a place selling noodles, I sat down and started a conversation with a woman who was sharing my table. I also noticed how hot the weather was, I had spent all day walking around and I have very pale skin so I decided I needed to get a hat. To my surprise I

found a Sports Direct shop and purchased a cheap baseball hat. I walked back to the hostel tired and got some food from Carrefour.

Back at the hostel it was far more active than last night and I had difficulty finding a seat in the common room. Once it got dark I sat at the bar, the tall Korean man was acting as the bar keeper. I was sat with about 6 other people talking about travelling around Europe. The Korean man pointed out how diverse the group of people was and how few immigrants lived in Korea, he was not used to seeing people of different cultures and ethnicities. I was also not used to beer being so strong, Belgium beer is apparently known for its high alcohol percentage.

The bar was closed and a group of us sat on a table drinking beer we got from a vending machine, we decided to go out and find a bar. We walked around for a while but nobody knew where we should go, we eventually gave up on finding somewhere so we ended up buying beer from a shop. We went back to the hostel and talked more before going to bed. Everyone was sleeping in the same room so we did not need to be very quiet when going upstairs.

The next day I got up and headed back to the train station to make my way to Ghent.

Ghent - 16/03/2017 - 18/03/2017

I walked back down to Antwerpen-Centraal station and jumped on a train to Ghent. An hour later I arrived at Gent-Sint-Pieters and had a long walk down to my hostel near the Sint-Michielsbrug bridge, the hostel was called Hostel Uppelink. The weather was really hot and when I got to the bridge it was full of people sitting along side the river drinking and partying. I remember arriving at the hostel really early, the hostel would not let me check in yet so I went to sit in the common room.

After an hour of recovering from travel I got bored and not being able to check in yet I decided to take out my valuables and leave my big backpack in the common room to go and explore a bit. I walked over the bridge to a really good and also cheap supermarket called Albert Heijn and bought loads of food. Outside the supermarket were maybe a hundred bicycles all parked up. I had a quick walk around the local area and went back to the hostel, I ate food and then checked in. The room I was given was empty and would stay empty for the two nights I was staying here.

Back in the common room I met a woman called Cindy, she was a clumsy French speaking Belgium woman from the city of Liège. I was surprised at how few French speakers I met during my backpacking trip, I had always expected Europe to be blanketed in the French language. We left the hostel together to find a cafe somewhere over the bridge. She was doing a PhD or something in Ghent on the topic of monkeys. She was really cute. The whole time I was with her she only talked about monkeys, nothing but monkeys like a French/ Belgium version of Jane Goodall. She even had her social media profiles set to images of monkeys. We went back to the hostel as she had a meeting at university. I never met her again but she seemed like a nice person.

I then met another woman in the hostel, she was English living in London on a weekend trip to Belgium. We sat next to the river for a while talking about work and travel. I told her about my travel plans and she laughed at my story from Paris. I told her that I had never even kissed a woman and that I still had not processed the event.

On the evening I met yet another woman doing a PhD, she was also English. We spoke together as she was working, I believe she was marking students coursework. I got another Belgium beer, this time one called Delirium from the hostel bar as we swapped stories of travelling and work. I also met a Canadian woman who was living in the UK working for the NHS. She was meeting some of her Canadian friends who were travelling around Europe. She talked about her friends as if she was in love with them and I was unsure of what their actual relationship was.

The next day I had hostel breakfast with the Canadian woman who was working for the NHS. We also spoke with two of the hostel workers, both were women. The first was from Russia, she had short hair and was very outgoing and self confident. The other from a South American country that I can't recall, she well less outgoing but still much more worldly than myself. We all agreed to meet up at lunch and go to an Irish Pub to celebrate St Patrick's day. Before that the Canadian woman decided to go and rent a boat and row around the river, I decided to go and explore the city more on foot.

When lunch time came I met with the women at the hostel and we all walked over the bridge to the Irish Pub. On entering we were given large green St Patrick's day hats. I told them I had never drank Guinness before, they were all very surprised at me. I ordered an almost pint of Guinness and sat next to the South American woman. I always had the idea that Guinness would be a really strong beer, but compared to Belgium beer it was like a soft drink. We spoke for a while as we waited for the Canadian woman's friends to turn up.

When they did show, they were very unusual. They were both involved in the logging industry in Canada, both very tall with lots of layers of clothing, one had long hair and the other was almost bald. They both had huge backpacks, the kind you go camping with rather than travelling in cities. The Canadian woman was very clearly obsessed with the long haired man, a kind of relationship that I have never seen before. I felt it was a one way relationship, as if she wanted to be romantically involved with him but he was just her friend. They seemed nice but I could tell something was dark about them and curiously so could the Canadian woman. At some point the Russian woman asked what I was reading and without thinking I replied a biography on Lenin. She sat back, a little shocked or confused. She did not like Lenin and believed he was not a true Russian, I don't particularly like Lenin either, but I decided to avoid the conversation.

I drank two pints of Guinness and spent most of the next two hours speaking to the south American woman sitting next to me. She had a lot of travel and life experience and seemed nice. After we left she said goodbye to me and thanked me for my conversation. It had been a nice day, but I was very unsure of how to handle any of these social situations I was getting myself into. The Canadians were, like me heading to Bruges the next day and we believed we might cross paths again. So we all left and headed back to the hostel.

The next day I woke up and had hostel breakfast with a big, tough looking Australian guy. We only spoke briefly and I barely remember the conversation after all this chaos. However We would bump into each other again a few days later in Amsterdam. I left the hostel and headed back to Gent-Sint-Pieters to take a train to the city of Bruges.

Bruges - 18/03/2017 - 19/03/2017

At Gent-Sint-Pieters I jumped on a train heading to Bruges, yet another really short trip. The train stopped at Bruges train station, near a lot of canals and parks. I had a long walk to the other side of Bruges and it was still very hot outside. I noticed Bruges was again different from the other cities in Belgium, smaller and filled with tourists. So many tourists that I would be surprised if anyone actually lived here, it would later remind me of Venice. I made my way to the hostel, it was called St Christopher's, I found out it was basically a pub with rooms. No access to a kitchen or cooking facilities.

Just before I got to the hostel I went into a supermarket it was on the same street as the hostel. I purchased some drinks and snacks and then walked into the hostel, like in Ghent I arrived too early to check in. Only having planned for one day in Bruges I decided to just explore the city with my backpack. I spent the next few hours walking around eating crisps and drinking chocolate milk. The city was full of tourists on what looked to be day tours to the city. Lots of small bridges and strange canals criss crossed the city. People taking photos of buildings, bridges and streets. I had the feeling the city and buildings have a deep history that I knew nothing about at the time.

Once it was passed time to check in I headed back to drop my backpack off, in my room I briefly had a conversation with a very tall German man with slick hair and then went to sit in the common room. I had soup for dinner and spent some time on my laptop. A Russian woman sat next to me and started a conversation. A year older than me, very short in height, almost like a tom boy. She was apparently working in Germany and had come to Belgium for a weekend trip. We spent 20 minutes talking before we decided to go for a nightwalk around Bruges.

Nightwalks are always fun, cities transform at night, especially small touristy places like Bruges. All the day trippers go home and they become quiet and empty. We walked around the canals excitedly, dancing around the empty streets as the lights of the city reflected into the water. She told me all these stories of her previous relationships and her sexual history. She told a story of a time when she had not had sex for a few months, became "desperate" and briefly watched her friend have sex through a window. She talked about prostitution a few times, about how one of her friends was in love with one. Then she told me I might be able to meet up with her back in Germany in a few days time.

She then started to ask me about my stories, but I did not have any. I never had a relationship, I had never lived with a partner. She kept questioning me, not really believing me and she started to think I was much younger than what I was telling her. She eventually wanted to go back to the hostel. She had lost all interest in me, I did not have as much life experience as her. She said bluntly "I can't have sex with you." and went up to her hostel room. Confused yet again, I went back into the bar and sat on my laptop alone just as I was before she started speaking to me.

Shortly after a man interrupted me, he invited me over to his table. The pub was dark and I was concentrating on my laptop, I did not recognise him. He was one of the people I went drinking with in Antwerp, not really wanting to go over I reluctantly said sure. I closed my laptop and put everything in my backpack.

I walked over to the over side of the bar and sitting on the same table I found some of the group I had gone drinking with in Antwerp, the Canadian woman and her lumberjack friends I had gone drinking with in Ghent and also the English woman I had briefly sat on the river with. All sitting on the same table drinking with each other. I said hi to everyone which created some confusion. They had all just met in Bruges and had no idea I already knew everyone on the table. The Canadian woman seemed to have a really low opinion of me and did not believe someone as nerdy as me could have met so many people on my travels. In disbelief she asked me about 4 times to confirm that I had already met everyone in previous cities, I guess I'm not as impressive as a lumberjack.

We spoke for a while and then decided to go out to a "club". I was still not really prepared for clubs or dancing. I had no appropriate clothes and I never expected to be invited out to these kinds of places before I left home. We walked to some nightclub but I can't remember where it was. I just remember that the walls of the club were white. I danced, kind of, and drank an almost pint of beer. After a while we walked back to the hostel while dancing and playing music in the street. I did not really like some of the women in the group, I felt they were laughing at me. The woman I had met on the river had clearly been laughing about me never kissing a woman, I tried to ignore it.

We got back to the hostel but I could not sleep. Alcohol stops me sleeping, and I had alot of thinking to do. I sat up in the bar and the only people still awake were a group of hostel workers, two men and a woman. They were all younger than me, maybe early twenties. They appeared to have crazy lives, drinking everyday and partying with strangers. I thought to myself that it looks like a fun but also a hard life. They had to stay up until 6am as part of their jobs. I joined in the conversation shocked at how much alcohol they seemed to drink.

At about 5am the two Canadian men finally made an appearance at the hostel, they had been partying on their own I guess this whole time. But they walked in and both looked like zombies, they walked around oblivious to anything around them and both looked angry. I said hello but they ignored me, walked passed me looked around the bar and walked back out. I'm not sure what was with them or what happened to them after that night, my guess at the time was they had taken drugs. I never saw them again. The hostel workers then put out the mornings breakfast before they all went to bed.

I ate breakfast early and did not see anyone from the previous night again. I then left the hostel and walked to Bruges train station, I was next going to Amsterdam but first had to backtrack to Ghent.

Amsterdam - 19/03/2017 - 24/03/2017

I started my trip to Amsterdam in Bruges, Belgium. I left the hostel in Bruges early in the morning knowing I had a really long day of travel. I first had to back track to Ghent by train, it was a short trip and Belgium has these really cool double decker trains. I had taken the same train to Bruges the day before so I knew exactly where I needed to go. I walked to the train station and got to Gent-Sint-Pieters without issue.

In Bruges I met yet another woman who believed that I was much younger than I was. A few months before a man canvassing in support for Brexit believed that I was a full 10 years younger than I was. Getting really annoyed by this I had for some reason formed a plan that by shaving off all my hair I would look much older. I still had about 5 hours before my bus to Amsterdam so I got my phone out and tried to find a barbers, the problem with this plan was that it was a Sunday. I managed to find a barbers open on Sunday, and it was on my way to the bus station. So I started the walk, it was in a residential area outside the main city locations.

I walked into the barbers and it looked "sketchy", some children were in the shop playing, maybe family of the owners. I sat down lying my backpack on the floor and waited for a few people before me. When my turn came I found the Barber did not speak English, I believe he was from Iraq. So I made a gesture to just shave it all off, which is pretty easy for anyone to understand. He looked very nervous and kept trying to confirm that I wanted it all shaved off, he obviously did not want to make that mistake. When he finally was sure about my instructions, he started laughing at me and became very happy and relaxed.

He talked in what English he could, asked me where I was from and what I was doing in Ghent. I answered as best as I could, I have become quite good at communicating to people with limited or no English skills, although I have yet to learn another language. He very quickly shaved my hair, and it felt fresh brushing my hand over it, not fully shaved, but as close as you can get. I paid up, picked my backpack up again and found a place to get coffee.

I now had 4 hours to kill while I waited for my bus, but I had already been to Ghent and I was not in the mood to do even more walking. So I hooked up to the WiFi, got some food and started reading my Kindle. Probably the quietest most relaxing day I had since my time in Paris over a week ago.

It came time to start walking to the bus, I got to the bus stop and I believe it was near a hotel. The station was called Akkerhage. A few people were standing around, alot of these Flix bus stations did not have signs, you just walked to the street and hoped you would find people waiting.

After a while a woman standing nearby started a conversation with me, she was Dutch and lived in Amsterdam. I think she was going back home after visiting family. Within 2 minutes of talking to me she asked if she could feel my hair because it was so short. If Dutch women at bus stations want to touch my hair, so be it I thought. Her name was Beertje. The bus turned up but it was delayed. The driver informed us that an illegal migrant of some sorts had hid inside the cargo hold of the bus, probably thinking the bus was going to the UK. Unfortunately he was not coming out despite

everyone knowing he was there, so the police were called. It took an hour before this man was out of the cargo hold and the bus could get going.

Me and Beertje were talking the whole bus journey. I found her captivating, she was about 23 years old, and she seemed very experienced in life. She dressed like a 1980s skin head, lots of denim with rips and tears. We sat on the bus together and flirted for hours, our legs touching, using any excuse to touch each other. It was one of the best bus rides I have ever had. One of those moments that I knew I would look back on. We talked non stop for hours, even when the rest of the bus was silent. We stopped off in Rotterdam to pick up more passengers, I could not see much of the city because it was very dark. But just from the window of the bus I could tell the city looked very futuristic.

We arrived in Amsterdam an hour later and got off the bus, it was late and very dark outside. The train dropped us off near a station called Sloterdijk. It was at this point she told me that I had to catch the train to the city centre and then catch a ferry! I was profoundly unaware I needed to catch a ferry, but she assured me it was very easy and also free. We added each other on Facebook and she invited me out for a night in Amsterdam, the only problem was that it was a whole week later, she was busy with work. I knew I would not be able to make it. She helped me buy a train ticket to the centre.

The train to the city centre was bittersweet now that I was alone again. This was my first time making friends with women and perhaps it made my emotions more intense. I could not read, or really do anything but sit and think for a few hours. Slowly focusing on the events that had happened, every sentence spoke, every time we touched. It always gave me a slight sense of regret, regret that the moment had passed and I could do nothing to regain it. I had never felt anything like this before, but I would feel it again yet.

I shortly arrived in Amsterdam Central train station, I was shocked to find it was also a dock for ferries. Beertje was absolutely correct, the ferry was free and was already waiting for me. I walked on, ferried across the river and checked into my hostel. The hostel was called ClinkNoord, I picked it because its sister hostel Clink78 was in London, and was the first hostel I stayed in. By this time it was really late, I can't exactly recall what I did but I have a feeling I spent the rest of the evening reading in the hostels common room.

Before I went to bed I messaged Beertje on Facebook: *"So, how are you going to convince me to go dancing Friday?"*.

I woke up in the morning with the reply: *"Do you need arguments to go dancing with me?"*

I met a woman from South America who invited me onto a walking tour of the city. I said yes, I had never been on walking tours before but hostels always offered them for free. We walked to the meeting point but I quickly realised I would find it super boring. I normally want to explore by myself and at my own pace. The tour was too restrictive, walking around slowly listening to someone discuss boring facts, making small talk with strangers. I really don't like tours but I have met lots of people that swear by them so it was worth a shot I thought. Within 20 minutes I had snuck off to explore the city on my own.

I first found the nearest McDonald's, I was hungry and wanted breakfast. McDonald's in European countries was not as good as in the UK, the regular menu was over priced but breakfast was about

on par. So I always found it good value to get some high calorie food before a long day of exploring. I did not do much the first day in Amsterdam, just explored the city and got my bearings. I walked around the canals, it was very busy and eventually made it up to the Museumplein and sat on the sloped elevated grass.

After exploring for the whole day I walked back to the central train station and bought some Pasta and snacks from the super market there. I also found the shop selling small cartons of milk, and I purchased one, I had not drank any milk since I left the UK and felt like my diet was missing calcium. I took the ferry back over the river, grabbed my laptop and cables from my locker and went downstairs to the kitchen.

The kitchen was pretty big and busy with people. Pasta is pretty easy to cook, I just got one big pan for the pasta and a smaller one for the sauce. I made small talk with some people in the kitchen and when the pasta was cooked I went and sat down, ate the pasta and watched Netflix. A man approached me and started speaking, I did not recognise him but he was the beefy looking Australian guy I briefly met at breakfast in Ghent. We had a beer together, he was with a Canadian man he had also met in Amsterdam. Me and the Australian guy, who was called Chris agreed to go to a museum tomorrow and then try a "Coffee shop".

I went back to the hostel room and met two Italian women just arriving. Both around 20 years old with dark black hair. One of them was acting very concerned that no other women were sharing our dormitory with about 10 beds. But as far as I was aware the room was mostly women, she asked me what beds were being used by women so I pointed them out and she was reassured. I spent a few hours reading and then went to bed.

The next morning I woke up and met with the Australian guy Chris. The hostel had breakfast, but I thought it was expensive at 7 or 8 euros. So we went over the river and the supermarket in the train station has really good choice of food. I picked up an egg and bacon sandwich and some snacks and we made our way to the Rijksmuseum. As I would find out museums in Netherlands are expensive, especially compared to the UK where most are free. So I would make this the only museum I would visit during my stay here. We arrived in the lobby of the museum and agreed to split up and meet back after 3 hours.

The museum was quite big and similar to other big national museums like the British Museum, V&A Museum or the Louvre. I did not think it was quite as good however, I got bored earlier than expected and went back to sit in the lobby for 20 minutes as I waited for Chris to meet me. I was sitting a little out of the way on some steps reading my kindle. Thankfully the museum had WiFi so he messaged me when he was ready to go.

Next we planned to go to a "Coffee Shop", to the uninformed these are places in the Netherlands that sell cannabis. I had never smoked it before, the only experience I had was with a couple of Cigars I smoked a few months previously. I did a little research and found a place called Abraxas that looked good inside. It was hard to find being down a small alleyway, but we could smell it before we could see it. It had alot of people standing outside smoking strange smelling substances.

We went in and ordered some drugs and coffee. I did not have any idea how to smoke cannabis, I tried to but every time I would cough, nor did I understand how to bring it into my lungs. It took a few too many attempts to get it right and I was coughing alot. Chris had no trouble and was already

talking about spacing out. We finished up and headed back to the hostel, by the time we got to the ferry I was out of it, but he was even worse. He did not seem able to speak and I was worried if he would be able to walk the rest of the way.

When we got to the hostel he did not speak at all and just went to bed. I sat down in the common room, super high I was unable to talk or move. I just sat on a sofa for 4 hours looking out of a window. It was my first experience smoking cannabis.

I eventually "sobered" up and briefly spoke to the Italian women again. Then went to the bar, I was warned by Daisy on Facebook, weed before alcohol but never alcohol before weed, so I decided it was safe. I somehow ended up doing Karaoke with a small group of people and tried to sing "I Want to Know What Love Is" by Foreigner; I'm a big fan of 80s power ballads from playing GTA Vice City when I was a kid. But my first time doing Karaoke and I was not very good, as I should have expected. I was told I should drink more but I went to bed.

After the first day and my introduction to cannabis I cant remember much else of my time in Amsterdam. It was mostly spent getting super high, either on my own or with strangers. The only times I would venture out into the city was to get either food or drugs, quite different from my experiences of other cities. The next day I went for a short walk again, grabbing a sandwich at the train station. I spent a short time walking around the city but after a few hours got bored and procured more cannabis. I bought more food from the super market and went back to the hostel.

At the hostel I realised I forgot to buy a lighter so I bummed one off some English men who were also smoking outside the hostel. I spent some time talking to them, they'd apparently come to Amsterdam for the prostitution. This was the first time it became clear why so many people were in the city. After getting super high again I went to make lunch, just a microwave meal and snacks. I spent the day watching Netflix, eating and going out every few hours to smoke more.

On the evening a woman sat next to me and started talking, she was German and was going home tomorrow morning. I guessed from her accent that she was from southern Germany, she was very surprised I guessed correctly, almost shocked. We spoke for about an hour then she invited me outside to go smoke even more cannabis, we sat near a bush with our legs dangling over the river. At this point it was very dark, the river was black and we could only see the lights from the city. Her cannabis was not as good as mine, maybe mixed with tobacco, but it still worked. She claimed to have bought too much cannabis and couldn't bring it back with her so she offered the rest to me. Her drugs combined with my drugs, I had too much for even myself.

She went to bed high, saturated with cannabis and I never spoke to her again. I can't even remember her name.

The next day was a quiet one, I smoked some cannabis and then went to Amsterdam Central Library to read for the day. I tried to do some reading at least once every week, western Europe has some really great public libraries. I ended up in the art section reading a book about the life of the painter Francis Bacon. Spending most of the day in the library.

On the evening a woman came into the hostel bed next to me. She was on a hen do and wanted to see a Sex Show. Her friends were all arriving the next day so she was on her own for the first night. She asked me to show her around the city and come to a show with her. I wasn't really interested in

going, the idea of a sex show seemed horrible to me. However, I had yet to walk around Amsterdam city centre at night due to all the drugs so I said I will go out but I won't be going to any shows.

We walked across the river, I didn't really get along with this woman. She was about 8 years older than me and I think we had different interests and different expectations from Amsterdam. When we got to the red light district it was busy. Groups of men walking in the same direction, like waves in a sea of horny men breaching the shore at the steps of a brothel. The women were in shop windows, I had seen this before in Belgium. The atmosphere felt awkward and forced. Menacing.

She eventually walked to the entrance of a place offering "Shows" and tried to get me to go in with her, but I declined. The entrance was guarded by several angry looking security guards, I imagine they have to deal with the worst kind of shit every night. Anyway it was like 80 euros, that is a lot of cannabis. For some reason she felt disappointed that I would not go in despite me telling her earlier. I told her she could go in on her own, the hostel is not far away. But she reluctantly walked back with me to the hostel. I never spoke to her again either.

When I got back the Italian women were in our room and had overheard our conversation about these "Sex shows" earlier. They had misunderstood and thought I was going to a sex show, they were curious how it was and why I was back so early. I went to bed.

The next day I purchased some Magic Mushrooms from what they call a "Head Shop". They advised me to go to the park called "Vondelpark" and take them with a friend, but I'm a solo traveller. So I tried to find what they call a sitter. This proved harder than I imagined. I came up with the idea to take them in Amsterdam Central Library as this seemed a relaxed place when I was there a few days ago. I asked a few people around the hostel but had no luck, including asking what turned out to be a woman in a wheelchair (I was already very high from cannabis) and being so nervous I decided against taking them on my own and smoked more cannabis.

On the evening I spent some time with Valentina, she was one of the Italian women sharing my room. We spent a few hours alone talking, I honestly was trying to flirt but I had no idea what to do. We added each other on Facebook, I left her feeling like I had missed something. I then bumped into the Chris the Australian guy, he was high as a kite. He offered to share some really strong cannabis, this stuff was something else. The feeling of being high was totally different to the other cannabis I was smoking, we could not stop laughing. No longer this stoned feeling, it made me jump off the walls with laughter.

We were both leaving Amsterdam tomorrow morning, I can't remember where he was going but he was taking a flight. I was taking an 8 hour bus to Berlin. In this crazy state of mind I came up with the idea to eat all these Mushrooms right before I got on the bus to Berlin tomorrow morning, this sounded like an excellent idea at the time. We talked for a bit and then I went to bed thinking about this apparently amazing idea.

I woke up the next morning and immediately realised how stupid I had been the night before. I'm not sure if I should blame the cannabis and alcohol or the mushrooms themselves, they may have been whispering to me from my backpack. In the common room I met Chris for the last time, he had his carry on Osprey backpack packed and was about to leave. I said goodbye with the feeling we would meet again somewhere else in Europe as he was also travelling for 3 months in the same

general area as me. We never did meet again but we kept in contact during our travels. He left the hostel before me.

On my final day in Amsterdam I thought about Beertje, the Dutch woman I met on the bus 5 days ago. I realised I would never see her again, but it did not feel right to stay in Amsterdam any longer. I had to backtrack to the same train station we parted ways, Sloterdijk. I never ate those Mushrooms. I never danced with Beertje.

Could you imagine me, an English village boy, dancing in an Amsterdam night club with a Dutch skin head woman. It would have been tragic, my inability to dress appropriately, to navigate the bar, to dance in any shape or form. I would have been a great disappointment for her. It might have been better this way.

Berlin - 24/03/2017 - 29/03/2017

*"You take the midnight subway train
You're callin' all the shots
You're struck by lightning
You're in love*

*You take the evening one on one
You're only livin' to have fun
You want to use me, take me home tonight
I'll make you wish that you were mine"*

— Ratt, You're In Love

The bus to Berlin did not set off until 11am and it took a very long time, about 6 or 7 hours. I didn't meet anyone on the bus so I would have spent it reading and listening to Dan Carlin's Hardcore History podcast. Once I got to Berlin it was night time and the bus station was dark. I remember following everyone off the bus somewhat blindly and without speaking to anyone I ended up in a subway station. I thought it was appropriate to play the Ratt album "Invasion of Your Privacy" I had discovered the band while backpacking and the opening song felt apt. I queued up to buy a ticket but once I got to the machine I still didn't know what station I should get off at or what ticket I needed. So I walked out of the queue and went to look at a map on the wall. The station was very busy with many people coming off the bus.

After trying to figure out where I needed to go and to guess what ticket I needed the station had gone silent. Everyone else from the bus knew where they were going and bought their tickets within a few minutes. The combination of the dark night, cold weather, being tired and now standing in an empty subway station in Berlin was spooky. I rushed down to the platform and very quickly got on a train.

I got off the metro and I had a very short walk to the hostel called St Christopher's Berlin Alexanderplatz, it was refreshing not to have a long walk to the hostel. St Christopher hostels as I had found out in Bruges were basically pubs with rooms, on booking I had not realised that the hostels were linked and I was now going to spend the next 5 days living in a pub.

As I tried to enter the hostel a bouncer tried to "bounce" me, I showed him my huge backpack and he let me go on in. It was about 8 or 9pm on a Friday so the pub was very busy, I recall sports being shown on the TV screens. I checked in and immediately bumped into the Canadian man I had briefly been introduced to by Australian Chris in Amsterdam a few days before. he had taken a flight to Berlin and arrived here before me, in the same hostel. He was with a tall woman, I can't recall much about her as we did not speak that night. He invited me out on a bar crawl that was leaving in an hour! I was reluctant to go as I had a really long bus ride and my phone battery was already low. Despite being tired I said yes!

I found that the Elevator was broke so I walked up the stairs. Upon entering the relatively small room I found a group of people sitting on the floor playing drinking games, they were younger than

me. I also notice two older men trying to avoid the drinking party, lying quietly on their beds at the back of the room. After such a long journey it was not a sight I wanted to see. I made small talk with the party goers as I unpacked my bag, one was noticeably energetic. After 15 minutes they left for the bar, they were pre-drinking apparently.

The party goers had been loud and had dominated both the room and the conversation, once they had left I approached the two men lying on their beds.

"So, who are the normal people in the room?"

I asked, making reference to the obvious chaos of the party goers. They laughed and introduced themselves, Australian backpackers, one of which was called Aiden who were on a large trip around Europe. They were both really tall and thin, almost looking like twins. They were travelling fast and if I remember correctly had just got back from Lapland in Finland. We spoke briefly and then I got changed had a fast shower and headed down stairs to meet the Canadian man.

We waited in the bar for a while and then headed out to the meeting point. I had actually not spent much time with this man and I had just arrived in Berlin. The night felt rushed and unplanned. We got to the meeting point and we found a group of Indians also going on the same bar crawl. I made small talk with them, they were mostly electronic or software engineers and for many their first time out of India. They had never been to a club before so I noticed some similarities with myself. I also said hello to two Korean women who were going with us as well.

I paid some amount of Euros and got a wrist band and then followed the bar crawl people to the first bar. I did not really meet anyone and was on my own, bar crawls on your own can be hit and miss. If you don't meet anyone you end up standing on your own, awkwardly trying to talk to strangers. The first bar gives me a free shot of vodka. I had never drank vodka or a shot before, just the name "shot" makes it sound strong so I was cautious. The Canadian man reassured me that its not that much alcohol and that i'll be fine. So I drank it.

The next bar was only a 5 minute walk and I get given another shot, still trying to analyse how drunk I will get from the first shot I don't drink it immediately. But after a while I realise I'm not even beginning to feel drunk so I drink the 2nd shot. I then order a beer at the bar. Again I have difficulty speaking to anyone and the Canadian man is busy with his new tall female friend. This bar also had a strange vibe, the dance floor was empty and someone was selling cocaine inside. After a while I decide to step outside to think for a while to decide if I should cut my losses and go back to the hostel.

I leave the door, walk up the steps and bump into the two Korean women I briefly spoke to earlier. They were talking together outside, I'm not sure why, maybe they had the same idea as me. I started speaking to them, one was visiting from Korea the other lived in Berlin and spoke okay English. Within a 10 minutes of talking about travel plans out of the blue they informed me that they were already in relationships. I said okay, not sure how I should have responded to such a blunt statement but I had no plans to "woo" them anyway.

We spoke for so long that the bar crawl was leaving the bar and moving onto the next one. I carried on with the bar crawl after making friends with the Korean women. It was a good decision as the next bar was fun, it had a white decor and was packed with German speakers. The dance floor was

horribly busy with everyone touching and bumping into each other. I ordered a 2nd beer and after drinking it quickly me, the two Korean woman and also the Indians from earlier all started dancing. I was still unsure of what I was supposed to do when dancing, the local Germans were just like the French in Paris, very good at it. But the Indians were worse than me, they gave me cover because along side them I looked like a regular club goer.

We spent about an hour here and I had a few more beers, now the most I had drunk in one night. We were told the bar crawl was moving to the next bar but some of the group wanted to stay here as it was so fun. Thankfully the Korean women and Indians all went onto the next bar with me. We walked for a bit and then I was told that I needed to take the metro to get there. I quickly paid for a ticket and jumped on board.

We arrived, got off the train and had a short walk to the next club. We walked in and the place was huge, multiple rooms all with different kinds of music, styles and lighting. I walked around on my own and lost contact with everyone. I had no idea where I should put my coat, the club had no chairs or tables. After about 20 minutes of walking around I found a cloak room and I think I paid a Euro to have it put away.

I then went out on a mission to find everyone else. I bought another beer and eventually found the Indian guys awkwardly dancing together in a circle. The Korean women eventually joined us as well. Our dance floor had a cage, and you could climb inside and dance. Me and the Korean women then ended up dancing in this cage together. I then climbed up the cage but was pulled down by an angry, bald, muscle bound bouncer. Who after pulling me down became really friendly for some reason. Perhaps he knew I had no idea what I was doing, or maybe the fact that I was also really happy and my smile disarmed him. What an interesting group I thought to myself. Everyone else here was dressed up and knew what they were doing, but not us.

It was getting really late and the Korean women left the club first, then the Indians went and I was alone. The club was still really busy and I tried to find the Canadian man who I had not seen in a few hours now but I had no luck. I decided it was time to go home so I grabbed my coat and headed down to the metro, it was now cold outside and I had no idea where I was. I got my phone out, it had almost no battery. I turned down the brightness to save power and used my GPS to figure out what train I needed to catch to get back.

I took an educated guess and jumped on a train, opposite me were two men speaking British English. I said hello and asked them where they were from, still surprised to see other British people on my travels. We spoke for a while and they confirmed that I was on the right train. I got off at my station and made the short walk back to the hostel, the sun just beginning to rise and the once busy bar now completely empty. I walked up the stairs to my room but I had spent so little time in the hostel I was not sure which bed was mine. I guessed it was the top bunk and because it was dark I had to feel the bed to make sure nobody else was sleeping in it.

I woke up the next day, not really sleeping, I hear the Australian men waking up and talking. I sit up and say:

"Last night, I ended up dancing in a cage with two Korean women!"

They laugh and say there it is, as if they were expecting me to have a crazy story.

I went down stairs and had hostel breakfast, the hostel provided a really good breakfast, lots of options and really good filter coffee in a big shared karaffe. I had not visited a museum in a while due to getting high and or drunk everyday and Amsterdam being so expensive. So I decided to have a museum day. I walked out of the hostel and it was my first time seeing Berlin in the light of day. Directly opposite the hostel was the Volksbühne, a large and very German looking theatre. I turned a corner and then walked down a street, I could see the pointy Berliner Fernsehturm in the distance. During the next 5 days I would use this tower as a way to help orient myself.

I walked down to the river and crossed over to Museum Island, I then spent most of the day visiting the Neues museum, Altes Museum, Alte Nationalgalerie, Pergamon museum and the Bode Museum. The museums were quite good, the Pergamon was apparently not fully open which was disappointing. A few days later I would hear the Bode Museum was broken into and had a giant gold coin stolen.

I spent about half the day on museum Island before heading to the Brandenburg Gate, I walked through the gate and went to sit in the park near the Reichstag. I watched some men play football, almost wanting to join in but too tired to have the conversation. After sitting and reading for an hour I continue walking down the park and get to the Victory Column. The roads near the column are very busy and in order to get to the tower you have to walk under the roads. I walk down the stairs and into the underground and I meet the group of Indian guys from the bar crawl last night. They shout at me and after closing the distance one gives me a huge hug. Somehow we have all summoned the energy to go and explore. I say hi and we quickly part ways.

I eventually start heading back to the hostel after one of my really long days, exhausted. I walk into the hostel and in my room I now find a tall Finnish woman named Taru who has just moved onto the bed next to mine. I introduce myself, she is in Berlin to see I think an Ed Sheeran concert. Shortly an older apparently Croatian woman enters, she is sleeping on the bed under me. I make small talk with her for about 10 minutes, she leaves to go take a shower and I say to Taru that there is something not right about her. Never trust a woman who is sleeping in a hostel with what appears to be all of her worldly possessions.

I then leave to sit downstairs for a while as I don't get WiFi in my room and I see the Australian guys, they also warn me of the Croatian woman. Something strange indeed. As it is now a Saturday the Australian guys are looking to go out to a club and Taru wants to go as well. I don't make solid plans yet, still tired from last night. I sit downstairs on my own as the Australian guys go upstairs to go get sleep. After relaxing for a while and getting myself up-to-date with the news I decide to go have a shower.

I go up stairs and the Croatian woman is there with the two Australian guys, one of which appears to be asleep on the top bunk. I make small talk with the Croatian woman for a while and go take my shower. When I get back one of the Australian guys has left, leaving only the sleeping one. The Croatian woman talks to me more. I'm laying down on the top bunk and she is stood up talking to me. She then starts taking off her clothes, all while talking flirtatiously with me in her deep accent. She then asks me:

"Have you have ever 'smelt' boobs?" Then she takes off her bra.

I try not to look directly at them.

"Boobs are not a big thing, they mean nothing to me." She says, topless.

I had up to this point never "smelt boobs" however the wording she used combined with her accent, well, I was confused. I did not believe what I was experiencing, I just hoped the sleeping Australian was secretly listening to everything so I would have proof of my crazy stories. After a few minutes Taru walked in and invited me and the Australian guy to go out. The Australian guy got up and left the room. After a few minutes I decided I was safer on the dirty streets of Berlin than in my hostel room. They went ahead of me by a few minutes and I followed, not sure if I would catch them in time.

I picked up my wallet, keys, phone and said bye to my new Croatian friend and went down stairs. There I found the Australian guys, Taru and two people she had met up with for the Ed Sheeren concert. An Indian woman named Karamjit and another Korean woman. We all sat around a table in the bar pre-drinking for a few hours before we went out. As I sit down the Australian guy who was sleeping on the bed asked me about the Croatian woman; after already telling the group what he had heard. I was relieved I would not have to tell yet another crazy story without any evidence. Confused he questioned why would she ask if you have ever smelt boobs, he apparently had his eyes closed so he did not see her undress. We then asked a stranger in the hostel to take a photo of us all just before we went out as we did not want the person taking the photo to be forgotten to time, I still had my extremely short hair.

The Australian guys had a club in mind, one they had done research on before called Bar Tausend, apparently it was a big famous one. So we set off somewhat unplanned, I followed as the Australian guys navigated. They were both very active and unpredictable, as we walked they often jumped on bollards and bins on the streets. A risky business I thought to myself. Either way they had a hard time directing us around Berlin at night, they took us down an alleyway that looked like a dead end. We found a gate but it required us to squeeze through the gap, I went first being the smallest man, the others followed.

We eventually got to this club and it had a large queue outside. The Australian guys started talking about Berlin nightclubs and how they are picky about who they let in. Apparently some have colour themed nights and they will reject people simply based on the colour of clothes they wear. I thought my clothes were okay, I had my smart black coat that I always wore. The women also looked smart. The Australian guys however had backpacking clothes on, not something you would necessarily wear on a night out. They were also still acting boisterous, moving around in the queue and making alot of noise.

We waited for half an hour before we got to the front of the queue, and waiting for us at the door was this brightly dressed woman with her male security guards. She was dressed so over the top that she looked like an alien, or like a male peacock, I guess the term "High Fashion" applies? She looks at the people in front and lets them in, then the next group are let in. Then she looks at us, whispers to her security guards, says no and shoos us away. The women are in front and they step out of the queue, followed by the Australians who I recall are now shouting "racism" for some reason. The brightly coloured woman now looks at me and as I also step out of the queue she looks confused, she didn't realise I was also with them.

The Australians are now angry and shouting, they had a really negative reaction to being rejected. I was shocked by their behaviour and hoped they would not escalate it. To improve the atmosphere I say to Taru the Finnish woman:

"We did not get let in because you are Finnish. They don't like Finnish people."

As a joke to the racism allegations.

To try and calm down the group I say "It's better to be outside of the club than inside.", I really did not care about being rejected at the door. This is taken as the group to be the motto of the night and we walk away and head back to the hostel. Back through the small gap in the fence and back into the hostel bar. We spent so long walking and queueing that it was now late, we talk for a while. The bar was now almost completely empty but we find the Canadian man from last night. The Australians start talking to him and concoct some plan to get a taxi to go to some club, but it was too much of a stretch for me. The women were also against the idea and all leave or go to bed. Everyone agrees that although the night was a failure it was one hell of a night.

The next day I woke up and lay in bed until the room was quiet. I would often stay in bed to avoid getting in other peoples way, packing bags can get hectic. The Australian guys were leaving today, but I can't remember saying goodbye to them, maybe they went really early. Another part of me also wanted to see what the Croatian woman would do if she was in the room alone with me. When I got up the only other person in the room was the Croatian woman and she starts talking to me. Very quickly she says.

"I will be playing with my plastic dick tonight. You will feel everything."

Being on the bed above her I probably would have. She then showed me her "Plastic dick". Interesting I thought.

I got dressed and left the room to go get yet another hostel breakfast. I was again going to have a long day. I had planned to do a really long walk of Berlin, all the way down to visit the Jewish Museum. So I headed out of the hostel again, walked over museum Island and carried on until I got to Checkpoint Charlie. Spent some time there and headed further down to the Jewish museum, I spent a while here as it was bigger than expected. I came across a street vendor and for lunch I had my first currywurst. I then headed across the city to the "Memorial to the Murdered Jews of Europe", what a dark name. And then back across the museum island to the hostel.

Back in the hostel I showered, spent an hour or two relaxing and then ordered food at the hostel bar. It seemed good value for money. Taru said bye as she headed off for her concert. I was now alone so I went up stairs to see what the Croatian woman was doing. All of her crazy behaviour over the last few days had made me super cautious, but we actually had a normal conversation. We spoke about how she was in Berlin for work and what her life back home was like, she was apparently from a village. She talked about how privileged I was but I certainly did not feel privileged at the time.

We went for a walk and ended up sitting on a bench in a park, it was dark outside and she was smoking. She asked how old I was, when I told her she was visibly shocked. She thought I was 16.... She corrected herself, she actually thought I looked younger than 16 but because I was in a hostel I could not legally be any younger. Yet another woman I had met on my travels who thought I

was a child. If she thought I was younger than 16 what the hell was she doing showing me her boobs. I realised that she wanted to embarrass me.

We walked back to the hostel and I went to bed. In the morning it became clear that Taru ended up inviting the Korean woman to sleep with her in the same bed, I told two Japanese women sharing our room that they were in a same sex relationship. Me and Taru would go and get hostel breakfast together and she would leave to catch her flight. I recall she was concerned if the airline would accept her large backpack as carry on but I had not took a flight before so I could offer no reassurance. We said goodbye, I was now alone in Berlin.

I had planned to spend the day reading as I had not done much in Berlin. I sat outside on the chairs for a few hours reading my kindle until I bumped into the Croatian woman again, now the only person in the hostel that I knew. We spoke for a while and then went out to get coffee together. She looked very fashionable while I looked a scruff wearing the same three t-shirts everyday. We got coffee for a few hours and talked. She found out I was going to Dresden tomorrow and actually invited herself to come with me, she talked about it several times that day so I think she was actually serious. Every time she discussed it I tried to redirect the conversation or tell her it wont be worth going. As much as I was okay speaking to her for 1 or 2 days I still did not feel absolutely safe around her.

We went back to the hostel and back up to our room, it was empty. Again she took off her clothes, then she asked me to take off her bra, not something I had ever done before, so why not I thought? I thumbed about but could not take it off, and she laughed. I gave up and she turned around and took it off herself. She then lied down on her bed and told me I had the perfect body. This was probably the first time I had been complimented like that in my life and as crazy as I thought she was it was very powerful. I would have done anything for her at that point. So I asked if she wanted to see it and she said yes, nobody had seen me naked before, not even in changing rooms or showers. So I took my clothes off and stood there, she just stayed on her bed looking, I'm not sure what I was expecting.

I put my clothes back on and she asked to add me on Facebook but I did not want her to, I still did not exactly trust her. She then invited herself to Dresden with me again but I declined. I climbed up to my bed and went to sleep, I would be leaving Berlin tomorrow and I would never see her or anyone else I had met in Berlin again.

The next day I spoke to Daisy, the American woman from Paris and we agreed to meet up in a few days time. She told me that having sex with the Croatian woman would have been a bad idea. She also explained that because I have never had sex before she thought it would be okay for me to have sex with an 18 year old. I'm not sure why she told me this, maybe because the Croatian woman was older than me.

Dresden - 29/03/2017 - 31/03/2017

Leaving Berlin I walk to the coach station in Alexanderplatz, it was about mid day and I had bought a load of snacks for the trip. The hostel I was staying in had an excellent free breakfast. It was in Berlin that I developed a habit of taking photos of all the free breakfasts I received and sending them to Taru. I was trying to make her jealous of my travels but also as an example of how repetitive travelling was, no matter where I was the breakfasts were always the same. The Chocapic cereal I never see back home, crusty bread cobs, cheese and ham slices and lots of coffee. My advice to hostels is if you want to make it a memorable trip, offer something unique for breakfast.

Before leaving Berlin I wanted to get a photo to try and hold the memory of my time in Berlin, something I did often and almost subconsciously when leaving a city. This case I walked to the Brandenburg gate a few hours before my bus to take this photo. It was really out of my way and I walked all the way there for no other reason.

At the coach station I approached a woman who looked like she was catching the same bus as me and struck up a conversation. She was a German woman named Sandra and she lived in Dresden. She told me she had just got off a flight from I think South America? We made small talk and shortly a bus came, she did not believe it was our bus so I trusted her. After 5 minutes the bus was still at our stop, and it was quickly approaching our departure time. I decided on my own to take a closer look. I walked up to the front of the bus as it was obstructed from view where we were standing, and it did indeed say Dresden on the front. I walked back over to Sandra, shocked she thanked me and we hurried onto the bus.

We sat next to each other talking for the relatively short bus ride. She invited me out on the evening to smoke "Shisha" pipes, I did not know what they were but I went along with the idea. This bus ride is also notable for it is the only time I lost a belonging in my 3 months backpacking around Europe. The baseball cap I purchased in Antwerp to protect me from the sun, one of three hats I would eventually purchase during my trip.

The bus arrived at the station near a place called Neustadt. My memory is not perfect but I believe she was being picked up by a friend so we hugged, added each other on Facebook and went our separate ways. I started the walk to the hostel which was an unusually short walk from the bus stop, I was getting really hungry. Food had been somewhat expensive in Western Europe and the Low Lands so I was looking forward to buying some food, I had heard Dresden would be cheaper. I arrived at the Hostel, it was called Kangaroo Stop, checked in and unpacked my bags.

I was told by reception that a Lidl shop was really close by. I knew Lidl from the UK as a discount supermarket so I got ready to buy a stupid amount of food. Supermarket food in the UK is different to alot of Europe, most shops offer nothing in the way of ready meals, pre-made sandwiches or pasta. I would often be required to buy all the ingredients to a sandwich bread, cheese, salad etc all separately. Often having enough to make 4 sandwiches. I sat eating these baguettes I had cobbled together in the common room while talking to an English guy who worked as an electrician in the city. He was living in the hostel due to the short duration of his work contracts.

It was in Dresden that I met a guy called Elliot who was from New Zealand, we spoke a little, he was sharing the same room as me. He had been travelling for 6 months or so in Europe when I met him, like me he was planning on going to Leipzig next. He was about 23 years old and had balding black hair, quite a wild guy I thought. I was in my room getting ready to go out with Sandra the German woman I met earlier, she had invited another one of her friends. I only had WiFi but no data on my phone so we arranged to meet at a place called AlbertPlatz, it was a public square with two large fountains. I arrived and walked around for 15 minutes before I eventually found them, it was a little hard to do without data.

We first went to get some beer from a shop and then started walking to the Shisha bar? or shop? A homeless man asked us for our beer bottles, it seems in Germany homeless get given money for recycling them. It was also quite busy, lots of people walking around and drinking on the streets it was really dark outside at this point.

We got to the bar and apparently these pipes are flavoured tobacco in a bong? And you smoke it using a mouth piece on the end of tubes. I have never smoked Shisha pipes before or since. Apparently Sandra and her friend smoke them often, and have done since they were young. Sandra's friend was particularly good, being able to shoot circles of smoke out of his mouth. I tried to learn but no luck. We talked until late and then Sandra had to leave because I think she had work in the morning.

I stayed with her friend for another hour talking about my travels. A lot of people I met were really interested in how to actually travel long term. I think everyone has a different idea of what long term travelling is about. Many people, especially locals have never met anyone that has travelled like this. I get the feeling that they did not even think it was possible to travel for 3 months. I had the same feeling about this man. We left the bar after smoking the last of the tobacco and I walked back to the hostel on my own. It was quite a good night, I always liked trying something new when I was travelling.

I spent the next day walking around the city centre of Dresden, it was a bit of a walk from the hostel and I had to cross a bridge. Just before I got to the bridge I found a shop selling Cadbury chocolate, the first and only time in Europe that I found English chocolate. I bought a big bar to eat during the day and carried on. The city centre was totally destroyed by the RAF during the war but it still looks over 150 years old. Unlike many other cities that were destroyed during WW2 they decided to rebuild the city centre exactly the same as it was. The city centre has lots of parks that I strolled around. It also has many buildings that I did not quite know what they were, but I do remember a large opera house.

I went to a shopping centre just to see what kind of shops they had. It was here I walked passed a woman wearing a jumper with the name of a university I had also studied at. I said hello and offered her some of the Cadbury chocolate I had bought earlier in the day. She had been living in Dresden for a few months as an au pair and was also shocked that I had managed to find some, she asked me where she could buy some for herself. We walked around together for 10 minutes and parted ways.

I started walking back to the hostel, I crossed the bridge over the river and went to go and sit in a park called Palaisgarten on a hill overlooking the city centre. I spent a few hours reading my kindle and reflecting on the day. It started to get dark so I walked back to the hostel and grabbed some

food from a nearby supermarket. I had a quiet night watching German TV on my own. The next day I would leave Dresden for Leipzig.

Leipzig - 31/03/2017 - 01/04/2017

I woke up and walked down to the same bus station I had been a few days ago and at 9am caught the bus to Leipzig. The bus was only a few hours so I planned to spend the full day exploring the city. I arrived at the hostel but was yet again too early to check in, I sat down for 20 minutes and then placed my backpack into their storage cupboard. I left the hostel and set off on a long walk to the Monument to the Battle of the Nations war memorial, this looked like the most interesting thing to do. It would also give me an excuse to do a lot of walking which is a great way to explore away from the city centre.

I walked all the way to the outskirts of the city, both Dresden and Leipzig felt very different from Berlin. They both felt much more comfortable cities to live. I spent a few hours climbing to the top of the monument, it was a huge hollow tower, it reminded me of a Cathedral. After a while I walked back to the hostel and by the time I got back I was yet again tired. At reception I found Elliot, the New Zealand guy I had spoke to briefly in Dresden, he was just checking in with his enormous backpack. I said hello and we agreed to meet up in a few hours and get drinks. In the meantime I got my laptop and spend the next two hours recovering from the day of walking.

Later Elliot comes in and we buy some drinks at the hostel bar. I buy the first round of drinks and we sit outside the hostel on some chairs on the street. He gives me a glass and I pour the beer into the glass, but I pour it fast and it creates a huge "head". I had never poured beer into a glass before so I did not know to pour it slowly. He finds this amusing, so amusing he takes a photo of it. We buy a few more rounds and then we buy one round too many and we go to bed, keeping the two unopened bottles. As I paid for the last round he said I can keep both bottles but I said he can keep it.

I go to bed, it being so dark and spending no time in the hostel I cautiously get into bed, hoping someone was not already sleeping in it. A few hours later Elliot comes into our room, but he was not booked into here. I have difficulty seeing in the dark but he puts his backpack down next to my bed and after a while climbs onto the top bunk of my bed. I had no idea why.

The next day I get up and walk, walk back to the bus station I arrived in Leipzig yesterday and catch a bus to Frankfurt.

Frankfurt - 01/04/2017 - 04/04/2017

I had planned to meet up with Daisy, the woman who had sex in front of me in Paris. I have no idea why but she wanted to see Frankfurt, I actually wanted to go to south Germany and see Munich or Nuremberg. Since Paris she had herself travelled to London and was now on the last few weeks of her trip.

I packed up my stuff and checked out of the hostel. I'm not sure what happened to Elliot, I believe he was still sleeping on the top bunk. I walked back to the Flix bus station and caught a bus to Frankfurt. I remember speaking to someone who was sitting next to me but they departed before we got to Frankfurt. Once we arrived some people departed the bus and collected their bags but then the bus driver stopped anyone else getting off. I was confused, I thought maybe they would just depart to their next destination with me still on. I did not understand German and when the driver pointed me to go sit back down I was even more worried.

After 15 minutes of waiting some police boarded the bus and collected everyone's passports and identity cards. I handed mine over and waited for another 30 minutes before they eventually let me depart the bus. I collected my bag and walked to the front of Frankfurt's main train station. The area was full of homeless and some were openly injecting drugs on the steps to the train station. The closer I walked to the hostel the worse it became. Just as I walked to the hostel I noticed two people in a heap of clothes and bags lying on the floor near the entrance, used needles strewn on the pavement. The hostel was called "Five Elements Hostel Frankfurt".

I checked in and found Daisy sitting at a table scrawling notes on paper. I sat down opposite her, she told me that she was writing a memoir of her travels in Europe. She had got bored of backpacking and did not have any further interest in exploring, she wanted to go back home and start working as a chef again. The rest of her trip consisted of Frankfurt, Prague, Berlin and Copenhagen where she would fly back. She had also ran out of money and was asking for her family to send her some. We spoke for a while longer and I went to my room to dump my bags.

In my hostel room I find a group of very overweight men from South America. They had just flown in to attend an electronic music event called "Time Warp" in a nearby town called Mannheim. They seemed like fun guys and I did want to see if the event still had tickets but I knew it would be too hectic to organise. I took a shower and went back out to see if Daisy wanted to go and explore Frankfurt, but she declined. She said the area was too scary.

I headed out and went to a REWE supermarket that was near by to get lunch and then walked into the city centre. I first walked into the Gallusanlage park where I found a high concentration of skyscrapers. I continued into the centre where I found a shopping centre called Galeria Kaufhof Frankfurt. The weather was really hot so I knew I needed to buy a new cap to protect myself from the sun. I also wanted to buy a compass that could clip onto my key ring to help me navigate cities. I thought it would be especially helpful when my phone inevitably runs out of battery after a night out.

I walked back towards the hostel, back through the skyscrapers. I entered the reception area of one with the intention of catching the elevator to the top but was quickly shooed away by security. I knew that I needed to hatch a plan. I grabbed some McDonald's food before heading back to the hostel to meet with Daisy.

She was still in the reception area now, talking to a tall guy from Brazil. She had not left the hostel all day. The hostel had a bar and I had yet to try drinking a cocktail. I noticed on the menu that a drink called Pina Colada contained milk, like an alcoholic milkshake. So I ordered one and chilled out on my laptop for a few hours. I told Daisy about my plans to ascend one of the skyscrapers to see the view of the city. I came up with a cunning plan.

"I will be an investment banker from HSBC looking for new office space due to the recent brexit vote. You will be my American assistant."

They both laughed but she was not willing to commit to my cunning plan. I went to my room and took a shower.

Later that night I met up with Daisy again and her new friend. I went to get an almost pint at the bar but on the way back to our table a woman from I think Belgium grabbed me by the arm and wanted me to speak to her. I really did not want to speak but she was not letting me go, I made another attempt to move away but she held onto my arm tight. I did not have much choice. She starts the conversation with:

"I'm only in Frankfurt for one night. I only came here to meet with my ex-boyfriend for sex but he stood me up so now I have an empty hotel room down the street."

Shocked I say oh i'm sorry! Then I try and see if Daisy is looking at me, I knew she would not believe this story.

"Sex is so important to us, don't you think?"

The conversation goes on for about 15 minutes with her trying really hard to entice me back to her hotel room before I manage to escape back to Daisy and the Brazilian man.

After sitting back at our table she did not believe what had just happened and suggests I keep making up these stories. Then I remind her about the events in Paris and how she had lesbian sex in front of me in Paris. She tells me that I should have gone for it! The woman was 9 years older than me and I imagine would be greatly disappointed with my lack of experience. They then both start laughing at me for being a virgin and eventually I fall out with them.

I notice a young English woman I had briefly spoke to earlier in the day. She was a 19 year old English student doing an Erasmus placement. She explained to me that she applied to other cities but they were all fully booked. The only city they had left was Frankfurt. So she reluctantly ended up here. She looked way out of her depth doing both drugs and alcohol with two mid 30s men from the middle east.

I went over to their table and said hello. The two men got in my way and tried to get me to leave almost immediately, but the woman wanted to talk to me. She looked and sounded either very drunk or very high. Slurring her words and not sure of herself. I almost felt that she wanted an escape

from the situation. Both men had at times placed their hands high up on her legs. I thought to myself that I had interrupted something very dark.

After about 20 minutes I went back over to Daisy who was still speaking to the Brazilian man and told her what was going on. Daisy explained that she probably likes it and that I should not go back over there. I took her advice but I could not help feel sad for the 19 year old student. Daisy told me that I always get myself into these crazy situations because I'm willing to talk to everyone, willing to talk to people I probably should avoid. I didn't think much of it at the time. After a few more hours of drinking I leave the hostel bar, on my way out I notice the older Belgium woman who had grabbed my arm earlier flirting with an even nerdier guy than myself at the bar. I then go to bed.

The next day I wake up to find the South American guys all lying half naked on their beds. They were all overweight, had very little clothing on and were not using sheets, it left very little to the imagination. I assume they had only just got back from a night at the electronic music festival. I eventually head out of the hostel with the single aim of getting to the top of one of Frankfurt's skyscrapers, without paying any money. Daisy was no where to be found so I head out on my own. I walk to the Gallusanlage area again and enter the first Skyscraper I see. I don't initially try my plan at the first skyscraper, I just ask them nicely if I can go to the top to see the city. The reception say that unfortunately I can't but unlike yesterday they don't shoo me out. They tell me of a tall building with a restaurant at the top!

I head back out and walk the short distance to the now third skyscraper and walk up to reception pretending I know what I am doing. They buzz me in and I walk through some metal detectors and into an elevator that goes straight to the restaurant. Once I arrive at the top I notice a sign asking me to wait here to be seated, but I have no plans on being seated. As the restaurant looked empty I just walked passed it and towards the windows. The restaurant had no customers, it was only about 11am and I did not even see any staff. I walked around the whole floor looking out onto the city through the large full length windows. After about 5 minutes a member of staff tried to get my attention but he quickly knew I was not going to be ordering any food and just walked off back into the kitchen. I head back down and back to the hostel.

I meet up with Daisy and we start to organise where we will go next. Prague was the obvious destination as it would allow me to continue heading east. We did some planning and found that a night bus would probably be the best option. I had never taken one before but it would leave tonight at around 10pm and arrive in Prague really early in the morning. We booked it and went out to go find some food.

It was a Sunday afternoon and the city was quiet. We talked about the red light district, she did not understand why it was so big and dirty. I told her my theory.

"Frankfurt has loads of bankers who after a good day make loads of money, so they go to the red light district to celebrate. But on a bad day they lose loads of money, so they go to the red light district to forget."

We walked through the tall buildings to the area with the shopping centre I previously went to. The streets were almost empty and empty streets in the day time make me anxious. The idea of everyone going to bed early in preparation for work on Monday. We found a reasonably busy Italian

restaurant and sat down outside. I believe I ordered Pizza, not sure why. Then we headed back to the hostel to prepare for the night bus.

Back at the hostel I packed everything up and waited in the common room. Daisy was carrying her two backpacks, one on her back and one hanging off her front. She looked like a snail or turtle, who if fell over, would have a rather difficult time getting back up. We waited until dark and then checked out of the hostel. We had both booked the night in the hostel but with the night bus we had no need for the last night. We walked the short distance to the bus station, I joked about using her arm as a pillow and then we boarded the bus. I did not meet a single person in Frankfurt who actually wanted to be there.

Prague - 04/04/2017 - 12/04/2017

Here my memories really begin to fade, my time in Prague and Krakow was different. It was different in my mind both at the time and looking back now. It has been segmented from the rest of my travels as an embarrassing and confusing period of my life. My original travel plan, if you can call it that, involved spending a month in a low cost city and get some reading done. Prague seemed like a good choice but nothing about my travels had gone as I originally expected and nor would this.

The bus was a double decker and was already almost full, the American took a seat near the stairs sitting next to someone else and I took a seat a little further on. The bus set off into the dark and I set about trying to get some sleep. I would close my eyes but I couldn't sleep sitting upwards being jerked about by the bus every time it turns a corner. So I got no sleep, at least nothing notable but I was fairly relaxed which helped. After a very long night I could see the sun rising and I knew we must be close to our destination, I was right because very soon the bus stopped and I grabbed my bag and stood up. I walked towards the entrance and told Daisy to get up, then carried on off the bus.

It was still very early at around 5am with the suns orange glow just breaking through the dark casting shadows from all the buildings. We arrived at Florenc Central Bus Station, the area looked very industrial with lots of bridges and eerily silent. We made the short walk to Hostel Elf, I knew they would not allow us to check in this early and asked her what we could do in the mean time. I was too tired to go walking or exploring and just wanted to lie down. She was hopeful they would check us in and we would get beds, but I had my doubts.

We got to the hostel and frankly we were lucky it was open so early. They indeed would not check us in but we could take a seat on the sofas in the common area just to the side of the reception. We ended up lying down for the next few hours until people started to wake up for breakfast. We decided to have some food and coffee and then leave our big backpacks with reception and go for a walk. We walked together into the city centre, the city was very popular with tourists and had lots of shops selling souvenirs. We would cross the river at the Svatopluk Čech Bridge, Daisy appeared to show some superficial annoyance at me, like she was annoyed I was even there, but it only lasted a few minutes. In hindsight I think she was annoyed I wanted to explore so much, but I still can't be sure. We continued up the stairway to the Prague Metronome and then around the park. We followed the river and went back across at the Charles Bridge and finally back to the hostel in time to check in.

During check-in Daisy was surprised and then annoyed that she was required to use a different currency from the Euro. The hostel room was large, relatively spacious and had the best mattresses of all the hostels I had stayed in before or after. After this point my memories start to fade, I'm not sure why but I can no longer remember an accurate timeline of events.

I believe on the first day I visited Prague castle but I found it disappointing and nothing about the place really holds in my memory. I can remember queuing up and paying for a ticket and I also remember seeing a man who had either fell or been assaulted, his head was covered in blood and he

was sitting down with police around him. I spent another day doing a huge circle walk around Prague I went down to the Dancing House. Then I walked back up near the hostel where I found a small outdoor market and a large church that I visited.

Back at the hostel every night involved drinking games with both Daisy and a bunch of guys from South America that had been here a few days before us and were really getting along well. The hostel had a bar/ fridge at reception where you could get a bottle of beer for if I remember correctly as little as £0.15 - £0.25. Just a handful of these new coins could get me drunk. But we never left the hostel, just drinking games every night. We did this for 4 nights, each night we made plans to leave the hostel but something always kept us from going out.

One night after drinking games the group decided to leave for a club, an 18 year old woman (or girl) from the UK had joined us coming for a weekend away. She had no idea what she was doing or where she was. I decided to decline the night out, it was already late and their chances to find a club seemed slim. I was proved correct when 20 minutes later the group piled back into the hostel, the woman (or girl) had either lost or had her phone stolen.

One of evenings still early enough for sunlight Daisy offered me some cannabis she had left over from somewhere. We went outside into the back of the hostel garden and shared a doobie. We continued the drinking games when I invited a Chinese woman who was sharing our dorm together to come and play. Her name was Margaret, she was alone and really quiet, depressed even. She eventually came out to the social room but quickly went back to the dorm.

At some point we met another American woman who like Daisy was also a chef. She was older than me and Daisy and was also travelling on her own. They started to make jokes about me still being a virgin which increasingly annoyed me, then they made plans together to go clubbing on their last night in Prague. I assume they went clubbing and the next morning and I avoided speaking to both her and Daisy. I had breakfast outside and noticed my backpack had a rain cover in a hidden zip on the bottom. I left the hostel early in the morning and took a walk to a hostel called Prague Plus which I had booked for 4 more nights with plans to do some more reading. I did not meet Daisy again.

I took the short walk across the river to the new hostel and checked in. I washed all of my clothes and managed to get the floor soaking wet. The hostel was almost empty which suited me, I then left the hostel for the day and walked to a local library, but it was only open to people with a membership card. So instead I spent the entire day reading in a coffee shop. By the time I got back to the hostel it was starting to fill up with two Austrian women moving into our dorm room. I spoke to them and they invited me out clubbing, I thought about it briefly but my clothes were still drying and I had little interest. I spent the evening drinking beer on my own at the hostel bar while watching Netflix on my laptop. I got quite drunk and depressed. Online I spoke to the Chinese woman Margaret from the previous hostel and we agreed to meet up the next day to go for a drink.

I spent the day going to the National Gallery Prague, which I really enjoyed. It was one of the most interesting art galleries I have been to. While I was there Ai Weiwei had an exhibition of a giant rubber dinghy. I then walked to the National Technical Museum which was a small but very "dense" museum full of different vehicles.

Then I met up with Margaret, I did not know what to make of her. She could speak English reasonably well but she seemed both confident and uncertain at the same time. We went for a walk and eventually found a bar, none of this was really planned out. We stayed for a while before going for a night walk. I don't remember the route we took, what we did or what we talked about. When we started heading back I gave her a hug and kissed her on her cheek. When I pulled away she tried to stop me. I jokingly invited her back to the hostel, with no actual intention of bringing her back with me. To my immense surprise she was considering it. I distanced myself from the offer and we parted ways. A fairly strange and unexpected night.

My last two days I spend reading and exploring the local area and parks. I remember getting lunch and beer at a place called Pivovar Marina where I sat in a little cut out part of the restaurant on my own. But I was now getting bored so it was time to move on.

I woke up, walked back into Prague, back across a little foot bridge, back to the Florenc Central Bus Station for a 6 hour bus to Krakow.

Krakow - 12/04/2017 - 26/04/2017

*"No sleep 'til sunrise, see the state of these eyes
Get messy, no lies, going hard every night, Jungle"*
— **Jungle, The Qemists**

The bus was stuck in traffic for about 4 hours. I was supposed to arrive at Krakow in the evening before sunset, but by the time I got there it was dark. I did not know what the currency was in Poland, or the exchange rate. Getting off the bus I found a nearby Burger King and was able to get a good guess at the exchange rate from the price of a meal. The name of the currency still eluded me though.

I took the short walk to The Little Havana Party Hostel, the city was almost fully booked and this was the only cheap option. The downside was that I could only stay for two nights and then had to move hostel again. Fully exhausted from my delayed bus, it was now about 10pm and the streets were full of people out partying. I walk up to the hostel and the street outside is full of people drinking and talking, the building that I think is my hostel is being guarded by bouncers. When I try to get in they point at my ratty tracksuit bottoms and "Bounce" me. I turn around and point to my big backpack and ask for the hostel and I'm let in. The hostel it seems is also a nightclub.

I walk through the very crowded corridor with little tables on the one side for people to put their drinks. I then proceed upstairs thinking what have I got myself into, I would ask myself that question more and more over the next two weeks. Not sure if I am in the right place but at the top of the stairs is a reception, the whole place is Cuban themed and very well executed. I start to check in and the hostel worker grabs a glass of what she thinks is water, drinks it, only to find it is a glass of straight vodka. An omen of what was to come. The room I was saying in was nice, very crowded with almost no space for my backpack to go, but each bed had a curtain for some privacy. I unpack, have a shower and clean up.

In my room a random guy starts talking to me and he is with some woman. The guy seemed to want to intimidate me, I guess to impress the woman? He for some reason wanted to shake my hand and then just squeezed it with the intent on hurting me. Whatever he wanted to gain by talking to me he didn't get it because I just went to bed for 20 minutes to check up on my emails. By the time I came out of my room it was quite late and the hostel had almost emptied out for a bar crawl. I spent the evening on my laptop on the common room on my own and then went to bed.

The next day I had hostel breakfast and walked to the Galeria Krakowska Shopping Mall. I needed to buy some new clothes, specifically a shirt. The clothes I had brought with me were not appropriate for going out to restaurants or bars, never being to a bar before going backpacking I had not even anticipated bringing appropriate clothes. So I purchased a black and white flower print shirt. I also found a watch that had a map of the world on which I really liked, a Casio ETD-300, so I purchased that as well. I then headed up stairs to see how much the gym access cost and signed up, I was still stuck with this idea of staying in one place for a while.

I can't remember what I did for the rest of the day, I likely walked around the centre aimlessly. I had a burger from the hostel burger bar and I had no intention of going on the bar crawl. I met a few people but they all left for the bar crawl. I recall a conversation with a woman who was planning on flying to the country of Georgia simply to have sex with someone, curious.

I woke up the next morning and had more hostel breakfast. I still had a beer in my backpack from Leipzig which I decided to leave behind in the hostel dormitory, maybe someone else would want it. I then threw away one of my t-shirts that had started to unravel itself. I checked out the hostel and made my way to another place called the Pink Panther's Hostel. I checked in and noticed the great hostel breakfast that had been laid out. I then went to the gym in the shopping mall and ate KFC.

In the evening I met a few people, two older women from the UK and two other random guys. The hostel provided large amounts of free vodka, just placing the bottles in the common room. Now I started to drink a lot. I would spend the days walking around and going to the gym and the evenings drinking free vodka. I visited both the Wawel Castle and the Jewish Quarter, eating at the restaurant Alchemia. The hostel employed a guy to run the bar crawl but not once did I see him run a successful crawl. For 4 nights in a row he would get utterly drunk in the hostel on the free vodka. Only on the 4th night was he able to get guests outside, only to be brought back by some guests 15 minutes later as he was entirely drunk. He then crawled into bed with a woman sleeping on the bed next to me and proceeded to both apologise to her and also avoid her at the same time, clearly very embarrassed. It was around this time when an Easter market sprung up around Town Square, Rynek Główny. I discovered this food called a Pierogi which I started to eat every day.

I didn't quite know what to do in the evenings. People would bring me free vodka and I would get drunk and people around me were clearly having sex with each other. It was like being placed into a different world and I started to feel very awkward. I wasn't really enjoying my time here and I didn't really like any of the people I was with. After 4 nights I was glad to get out of there and started to question what I was doing. I left the hostel a little angry, I think I was jealous of how easy other people were just finding people and having all this apparently free sex. It just seemed so normal for everyone else.

The next hostel was called the Greg and Tom Party Hostel, apparently one of the best party hostels in the world. I walked across the centre of Krakow and found the hostel entrance where I was allowed to check in, apparently the hostel was totally empty, I think to be cleaned. I was offered a free shot of vodka by reception, which I declined. I found my room, which was in a different building just down the street and dumped all my stuff in the empty room.

The hostel offered both free hostel breakfast and dinner, which was a really good deal. In the evening I got some free food and met a couple of English guys who were living in London and an Australian guy, we were eating food in the back room that was set up like a strip club. The hostel has a reputation for crazy bar crawls and everyone I met was planning on going out that night. In my room I met another Australian guy and an American woman named Jenny, they had travelled together from I think Budapest and they were also planning on going out.

I spoke to another man and a woman who were also sharing the room, I believe they were from Brazil. The guy had apparently been travelling non stop for a year at that point. They were also going out on the bar crawl that night.

The evening started out with lots of drinks in the hostel, people played beer pong and other games. A group of British women all took off their bras and started a competition as to which men were going to have sex with them, I decided to take my leave. After a few minutes they had apparently selected the winners and went back to their hostel room. After a few hours everyone was led out to nightclub after nightclub, I never really knew where in the city I was and all of the clubs were a total blur. Early on in the night at a club I remember the Brazilian woman from my room going from guy to guy kissing each of them. I did not really know what to do, she walked over to me I think expecting me to kiss her but I made no move, she then called me a boy. I remember thinking ah, so this is how STIs are spread. The Brazilians were also very good dancers, I still had no idea how to dance and still don't.

I did this for 2 nights in a row, both times stumbling back to the hostel alone at sunrise.

After the 2nd night a Polish man checked in and was on the bunk bed under me. We talked about my travels a few times, he was surprised to find I had spent so long in Krakow just partying. He said:

"I knew English people came to Krakow to party hard, but not this hard!"

On the 3rd night I was handed a 1 litre bottle of vodka, not really knowing how much this was to actually drink, I drank the whole bottle in about 30 minutes. I now know that this could have been a lethal dose of alcohol and in hindsight I am quite lucky. The effects of this much vodka resulted in me hanging myself upside down from a metal bar, jumping into a water fountain and snapping off one of my toenails and finally falling asleep in the middle of a nightclub. I distinctly remember being woken by two men pointing at me and shouting:

"He is fucked!"

It was at that point I realised I needed to get back to the hostel.

I did not sleep, too much alcohol. The next morning Jenny the American woman grabs one of my feet, laughing at me starts to describe what I did the previous night. I genuinely had no recollection, at least to begin with. Apparently I was dancing on a stage at one point and I kept dry humping some Scottish guy who worked at the hostel. Then I finally remembered breaking my toenail, it was all slowly coming back to me but I really needed to think deeply to bring the memories back.

At breakfast I came across three Australian women, one of which was crying. I hear her say:

"Why do I keep getting drunk and cheating on my boyfriend?"

Another group of women were really angry, apparently the Australian guy sharing my room had sex with a woman in their hostel room. He later claimed nobody had noticed him, but that clearly was not the case. Everyone including myself were paying the price for the previous night.

My mind was like glass, I could not walk properly but I did not throw up! At lunch I decided I had improved to the point I decided to get more Pierogis, this time from a little restaurant around the corner called Przystanek Pierogarnia. I ordered a mixed dish and as I waited two women started talking to me. They were both from Mongolia and I had never knowingly met someone from Mongolia before. They actually invited me out to a club in the Jewish quarter but I declined, I knew that I could not take another night drinking. I headed back to the hostel and the two English guys

were sitting in the common room, they were also hungry. I pointed them towards the Pierogi restaurant and off they went. My last night I declined any further drinking and went to bed early, checking out in the morning. It was sad to see my time here end as I had fun with so many different people.

I checked out the hostel, everyone I had met having already departed at this point. I then headed to Mosquito Hostel with the goal of getting back to normal, no more alcohol, no more parties. I was seriously questioning if I would even survive Krakow.

I walked to and then checked in the hostel and then went off to the gym to do some running. Later in my room I met a slim Australian woman who had just arrived named Olivia, about 21 years old and with frizzy blonde hair. She was already speaking to an older guy from Norway called Firat who was leaving in the morning and they immediately invited me out to a bar. Well, I guess I have to go out again, what is one more night drinking? We walk out to a bar, it was in a small street that was covered by a roof. It was a meet up of backpackers of some form, maybe 15 people were meeting in the bar. I sat at the end of the bar on a stool, the Norwegian guy was very aware of "bar etiquette". He had this plan to travel overland to India which I thought was absolutely wild. I spoke to a few other people including a Dutch guy who was a drug dealer and a creepy guy who claimed to have moved to Krakow for the women.

After an hour we headed out to a night club, we stood outside queuing and once inside I recognised the club! I had been here before on one of my other bar crawls. I had a few drinks and noticed people slowly started to leave as the hours went by. Me and the Australian girl Olivia notice that the creepy guy had left with a Korean woman, I thought they were leaving to sleep together. The Korean woman had that agitated "I'm looking for something" gaze I first witnessed in Paris.

I can't remember how I got back to the hostel, but I do remember that I still had not made my bed. Given it was now in the early hours of the morning and the room was full of sleeping people, I decided against trying to fumble in the dark and possibly waking everyone up. So I just roughly put the mix of sheets over me.

The next morning I get up for hostel breakfast, which was again really good in Krakow. Standing in the kitchen was Elliot, the New Zealand guy I had previously met a month ago in both Dresden and Leipzig. We both looked at each other surprised, he was carrying a French Press. Both of us were quite surprised, I was of the opinion he had somehow followed me, but I guess it must have just been luck, maybe bad luck. I got breakfast and coffee but I can't remember what we discussed that morning.

I met up with Olivia and we had a walk around the city, I showed her around. At this point the Easter market had gone and we walked to the shopping centre to get food. The hostel was having a party for some reason in the evening, I think it was the anniversary of the hostels opening. Elliot was there as well.

The next day I woke up and had hostel breakfast and coffee with the Olivia. We planned to spend the day going to Oscar Schindler's factory museum and then to the Museum of Contemporary Art in Krakow. We walked down to the river Vistula, we walked passed a cafe and we decided to get some coffee, I never turn down more coffee. The weather was fairly poor, overcast skies and it was even snowing a little at times. We arrive at Oscar Schindler's museum but we see a queue so we decide to

look for some food before we go in. Just as it happens we see a little temporary Indian food place just near the entrance. We have some Indian food and then get back in the queue. We walk around the museum together, a familiar experience at this point.

After a few hours we head just around the corner to the Art Museum and after another few hours we start to head back. We see a metro system, she did not like the idea of walking all the way back so we jump on. Neither of us wanted to pay for the metro, so we didn't and thankfully nobody came to inspect tickets.

Back at the hostel I had planned to meet a Danish woman named Marti I had met a few days ago for drinks. I'm not quite sure what I was expecting but at the bar she quickly turned the conversation into a sexual one. She seemed to have a very peculiar life, living with gay men, watching them have sex. She was apparently attracted to other women's period blood. Not a conversation I was expecting to have. We walked back to the hostel and just as we got back to the entrance out burst Olivia and an English guy, both clearly very drunk, being chased by an elderly polish woman with a broom. We then for some reason decided to get more beer.

We took the beer back into the common room and drank a few. The new English guy was trying to angrily flirt, as if he was frustrated with Olivia. She went to bed, leaving her mobile phone on one of the chairs. I decided to go to bed as well and just leave this chaos, Marti was now talking with some other people from the hostel. I picked up her phone and went to bed.

The next day I had hostel breakfast, Olivia did not seem to care about her mobile phone. That was not surprising. She told me that she just had to get out of there because it was getting too weird and if someone wanted to steal it they were welcome to it.

We had booked a day trip together to go to the Auschwitz-Birkenau concentration camp that day. This would be both of our last days in Krakow, at least I believe it was. We boarded a mini bus that was parked up at the entrance of the hostel and eventually we set off. We spent the whole day on a guided tour, Olivia commented on how it was significantly more depressing than Chernobyl which she had visited only a few days ago. On a tour through the still standing gas chamber I remember absent-mindedly and accidentally kicking a small stone and getting an evil look from our Polish tour guide. What surprised me was the size of the camp, the term camp is a bad description, it was more like a city.

We noticed the deep contrast between the Jewish visitors who were crying, singing and hugging and the Chinese visitors. Who were standing on the rail way tracks, laughing and joking. One was repeatedly jumping up in a star fish so he could get a photo using his selfie stick of the camps entrance and railway tracks under his legs. I'm not sure what these Chinese "tourists" knew about this place, I hope they were just uneducated.

Back at the hostel I notice staff had put a letter on my bed saying that I have not paid for the night, I ignore it knowing I have in fact already paid. I don't think the staff liked that I still had not made my bed. Me and Olivia start looking for places to go and eat when the hostel invites us out for a meal at a traditional polish restaurant. We say yes and we are basically going with the entire hostel, including the New Zealand guy Elliot.

The restaurant was almost underground, dark and had lots of wall decoration. In hindsight it was clearly a tourist trap with quite high prices. I had some food that was okay, it was like an English stew with dumplings, really heavy food. I met an American woman who got really angry at me when I said I supported Donald Trump. She was sitting next to a guy who could also tell I was winding her up and we both found it very funny. She said "Fuck You!". People like this don't realise they can't change peoples minds by getting angry and shouting. I also met a Greek woman named Eleni from Thessaloniki, who asked about my travel plans and questioned if I was going to climb Mount Olympus when I got to Greece. Well I had not thought about it until that point.

Everyone from the hostel decided to go to a bar. The Olivia stopped talking to me, she had found some other guy. I was getting drunk with Elliot and a woman from the day trip earlier. I was drinking too much and getting depressed about Olivia losing interest in me, everyone else from the hostel had slipped away and we decided to head back ourselves. At the hostel Olivia was speaking to this new guy, I don't remember saying anything and go to bed with intentions to leave early in the morning.

I wake up at like 6am, I notice Olivia had not slept in her bed that night. Elliot who as it turns out was sleeping in the same room as me yet again, just quickly sits up from the bed opposite mine, looks at me, sighs and falls back down. God knows what he was thinking. A few days later he would sadly be found dead after an accident in the Zakopane mountains. Those who god loves die young.

I pack up my bag, get some hostel breakfast and coffee and check out. I had still not made my bed. The hostel still thinks that I owe them money, they don't seem to have any records of me paying for either the last night or the day trip. I just pay anyway but I insist I have already paid, they send me an email a few hours later refunding me the money. I walk to the shopping centre, say good bye to one of the receptionists at the gym and walk to the bus station. I then take any bus going south, which just so happens to be a place called Brno, a place I had been two weeks prior but at the time I could not remember. I sat on the bus looking out the back window as I departed. I was so very depressed but happy at the same time. Happy that I was alive and experiencing this. I had survived Krakow, but only just.

Brno - 26/04/2017 - 27/04/2017

I arrived early afternoon in Brno, the bus drove passed a very strange building that re-kindled memories from two weeks ago. My original bus from Prague to Krakow stopped here and I completely forgot. The peculiar looking shopping centre, a white building that looks like a block of cheese full of holes. I made a short walk to the Hostel Mitte and checked in. I went up stairs to get some free hostel coffee and there I met an American couple who looked like they were in their 60s. They were travelling long term around Europe, I imagine they had recently retired. It was a welcome change from the chaos of Krakow. I told them about my travels while drinking my well needed coffee.

I had only booked one night in Brno, I wanted somewhere small and quiet to collect my thoughts before I moved onto another adventure. After a few hours relaxing In the hostel I ventured out into the surrounding city. I just walked around, I don't think I even did a quick Google search about the place. Then I went to a super market to get some food for dinner and then went back to the hostel. I spent the rest of the evening on my laptop watching videos and planning my next few days travel before going back to bed.

The next day I woke up around 9am and had hostel breakfast. I then scooped up all my belongings that had been around the floor of my bunkbed and checked out, I still find it amazing that I did not lose more stuff. Just after leaving the hostel I walk passed the elderly American couple from the day before and say good bye. I then head back to the bus station to catch a bus to Bratislava with a strong drive to get down to Greece.

Bratislava - 27/04/2017 - 29/04/2017

The bus to Bratislava was uneventful, just a short Flixbus. The bus stop was also not far from the Wild Elephants Hostel so it should have only been a short walk. On the way I got lunch, I bought some pastries from a stall. The town centre was like a maze and I found myself walking around in circles for about an hour to find the hostel. I eventually found it in a large public square, but it was not easy even for me.

The hostel was a strange one. As if someone had purchased a series of flats and joined them altogether, long corridors and strange rooms. I have found a few other hostels set up like this. I checked in and was told that the hostel would be serving dinner tonight. I walked into my dorm room, a very large room with few beds. It had a table in the middle and uneven floors that would make sounds with each step. I was sharing the room with two American guys who had travelled from Asia by train across Russia. If I remember correctly they had only spent 3 weeks travelling and had already travelled to Europe. Myself had been travelling way longer than them and had only just made it from England to Slovakia! At the time I hated the idea of travelling so fast but now I realise how interesting of a trip it must have been for them. I was also sharing the room with a 19 year old Dutch woman called Romy who was backpacking on her own.

I chill out for a few hours in one of the common rooms and then head out to look around the city centre. I don't remember anything catching my attention so I buy some beer and go back to the hostel for dinner. A few hostels organise social meals where either the hostel pays or guests chip in and everyone cooks something. I can't remember what everyone cooked but it was pretty boring and I wished I bought food else where. I spend a few hours in the common room drinking beer and talking to one of the hostel workers about the band The Offspring, I had only just started to listen to them. I was also told how Bratislava was the setting for the horror film "Hostel", which I only vaguely remembered at the time. I then go to bed.

The next day I wake up and have hostel breakfast. I have the idea to do a large walk around the river and nearby hills. So I walk down and then along the Danube river, I walk passed an abandoned building that I have a quick venture into and carry on to the Vinárky area of the city and walk up very small steep roads. It had recently rained as all the plants and trees were still wet. After walking around for about 5 hours I head back to the hostel, have a shower and relax for a few hours with the Dutch woman Romy. I do some quick research on cheap food and find a place called Funki Punki Creperie, although i'm not certain it was called that at the time. I invite her as well as the American guys out but the American guys were packing their bags. So me and Romy go out for food.

We walk around the old town to the restaurant/ cafe, sit on the bar and order crepes. She tells me about how she was depressed for a while back home. She did not know why and that she even had a boyfriend at the time. She was also very tall and seemingly self conscious about it. When we left the cafe we got a selfie together and she had to bend her knees to get in the same picture as me. I thought it was funny but she looked sad.

We head back to the hostel. I then try to find my next destination only to realise the whole area has a bank holiday tomorrow and all the hostel and hotels seem to be fully booked. I end up having to go to Vienna, a city I had planned on skipping.

Vienna - 29/04/2017 - 30/04/2017

I wake up, have hostel breakfast and check out. I walk back down to the bus station and catch my bus to Vienna, not really sure why I'm going backwards away from Greece. The bus to Vienna was longer than advertised, we spent a lot of time stuck in traffic, probably due to that holiday.

The bus dropped me off in Erdberg and I walked the short distance to the hostel/ hotel Meininger Vienna Central Station. On the way I went to an ATM machine and tried to withdraw money, however the ATM machine errored and just gave me my card back. Later I found that it had withdrawn money from my bank and I had to make a complaint a few months later to get it back. At the hostel I had to wait an hour before I could check in so I got out my laptop and had some coffee. They checked me in and I headed up stairs to my dorm. I met a few really young, maybe 18 year old American women. They told me they were scared because they thought that Austria was a really poor country, they were surprised when I told them that it is one of the richest countries in Europe. I also met an American man who was flying back home tomorrow. He gave me some American chocolate to try.

I left the hostel and walked through the Belvedere Palace gardens, passed the Heroes' Monument of the Red Army and into the centre of Vienna. I spent the day exploring the city centre but I had no plans to stay here any longer than I needed. My mind was on a race down to Greece so as interesting as Vienna may be I had to leave tomorrow. I walked back to the hostel and went to bed without speaking to anyone.

The next day I woke up and had hostel breakfast; I had to pay for it but it was really good! And then I walked back to the Flix bus station to go to Budapest.

Budapest - 30/04/2017 - 03/05/2017

The bus to Budapest took quite a while and I arrived in an area called Népliget. It was one of those times when I would arrive in a new country and not even know the name of the currency, let alone the exchange rate. I walked down some busy and very long roads, lots of cars but few pedestrians. I admit at this point I was a little lost, the long roads confused me and I often thought I was walking in the wrong direction. The closer I got to the city centre the more pedestrians were on the streets. Eventually I see a supermarket and inside I notice a group of American women that I say hi to and buy some crisps and chocolate milk. I continue walking and come across a guy from New Zealand who seems like he knows the city he points me in the general direction and says the hostel is not far.

I arrive at a busy intersection where the Avenue Hostel is supposed to be but I can't find any signs. Another backpacker walks up to me and she is also looking for the same hostel with no luck. We end up walking around the entire intersection, looking for signs on a door, or other backpackers, anything. We must have been looking for about 40 minutes before we eventually found the entrance. The hostel was another one of those strange adhoc hostels that looks like a combination of flats across multiple buildings. We check in but I don't speak to the female backpacker again. The dorm room was quite big and all the beds had curtains. I had a shower and relaxed for a few hours.

When it started to go dark I asked reception for food recommendations and they told me about this place nearby that sells Pasta. It was just around the corner. So I leave the hostel and grab some Pasta for takeout and head back in the hostel to watch Netflix. A large group of women are playing drinking games in the common room, I can hear as they talk about trying to have one night stands for their last night in Budapest. Several of them keep looking at me as no other men were around. A few weeks ago I would have been drinking with them but I was still calming down from Krakow, I decided against speaking to them and went to bed.

The next day I woke up with big plans for my time in Budapest. I started the day by walking down to the Danube and crossed the river. I walked up the Citadella and then to Buda Castle and then the Fisherman's Bastion, passed the Parliament building and then back across the river to the hostel. In the evening I did not meet anyone and I had Pasta again for lunch. I watched a lot of Netflix in Budapest.

The next day I walked up to the Városliget park and walked across a little pathway over a small lake. I found the Széchenyi Thermal Bath by accident, the hostel had recommended it but it was not my thing. I went inside briefly to see. I then walked around the whole park and back to the hostel for lunch. In the afternoon I went to a museum called the House of Terror and then called it a day and went back to the hostel. In the evening I had Pasta for the third time. Very lonely, I started to look at plans for where I would go tomorrow.

Timișoara - 03/05/2017 - 05/05/2017

I woke up early and on edge. I knew yesterday was my last full day in Budapest but I still did not know where I would end up tonight. I quickly had a shower and packed my bags, not wanting to waste any time. At reception I asked a woman on the desk where she would recommend I go next, the options were Croatia, Serbia or Romania. She was initially confused so I told her about my plan to make it down to Greece, it did not help much. She was shocked that I did not know where I was going and could not help me.

I sat down on what looked to be chairs made out of scaffolding and spent 20 minutes trying to plan where I would go next. I could not understand the Hungarian train website nor could I find any buses. I decided to walk to the main train station called Budapest Keleti and see what I could catch leaving today. It took a while but once I arrived I looked at the board and saw a train leaving soon going to Romania, so the decision was settled. I walked over to the ticket office, I waited in line for about 20 minutes before it was my turn. The woman on the desk did not speak a word of English but I somehow managed to purchase a ticket to Timișoara not wanting to go all the way to Bucharest yet.

I boarded the train and found that it did actually go all the way to Bucharest, but it was a slow train so it took many hours, almost like a night train. I walked down the aisle to try and find my seat as all seating was designated. Once I found my row of seats I found people already sitting in them, I spoke to a woman nearby and she told me the designated seats don't really mean anything and I should just sit anywhere. So I sat on the seats in front of her, she was Romanian and we were both going to Timișoara. We spoke about Romania, she was told me that she was always confused when she would see tourists coming to see her country. She asked me if I was going to the black sea, I had no intention of going that far but she persisted. She said it was "Very liberal" and then an older man a few seats away started laughing and commenting in Romanian. The woman informed me he was laughing at how "Liberal" the places on the black sea were. I'm not sure I understand the joke, I thought maybe they had a famous nudist camp.

Once the train arrived in Timișoara I departed the train with the Romanian woman, I believe she had met her boyfriend or family member at the train station. I walked with them for a while in the dark as it was late when we arrived. They were not walking all the way into the city centre but directed me to continue walking in the same direction. I pulled out my compass to laughter, the Romanian woman apparently had never seen someone actually use a compass and found it humorous.

I continued walking into the city centre in the dark when a man and woman who were behind me asked me for directions. They were both backpackers as well, huge backpacks and they were carrying all sorts of smaller bags haphazardly in their hands. Very disorganised I thought. The man had long dirty looking black hair, dirty clothes and I could smell his body odor. He was wearing heavy looking clothes with big boots. His girlfriend was called Naomi. She was smaller, thinner and younger than him, less confident maybe, less ambitious maybe.

We spoke for a while, they were also looking for a hostel they had booked but were having trouble finding it. They had just got off the same train as myself. I had also booked into a hostel but I could

not remember what it was called, but the probability that we had both booked the same hostel in such a small city was high. We walked for a few minutes until the road opened up into a huge town square, with a McDonald's right in front of us. The perfect place to take a rest in an otherwise unfamiliar place.

We went into McDonald's to get food, it was still busy despite it being so late. I didn't know what the currency was and they didn't know we had actually crossed into a different time zone. We all ordered food and sat down to talk about our plans. I was very tired and just wanted to get to the hostel and take a shower so we headed out quickly after eating.

Outside the woman pulled out her phone and started directing us, but she was going north and I knew that at least my hostel was south east. I told her to stop pretty quickly and that I thought I could direct us faster. I pulled out my phone and compass and directed us out of the city centre and to a place called Freeborn Hostel. It was in a really dark allyway, little street lighting, no cars driving by. It looked sketchy. I told the couple that as bad this looks it is genuinely where my map was telling me to go. The man paused for a few seconds and held back his girlfriend, even I knew it was risky for them to be following me, a complete stranger directing them to a dark street. But 2 minutes later I found the door to the hostel, they thanked me and said it would have taken them hours to find the place.

We checked in, it was a small hostel with very friendly staff. I had only booked one night in the city but it looked nice so I decided to book two, that would give me a full day to explore. We sat down in the kitchen as a hostel employee gave us an introduction to the city with the universal tourist maps every hostel gives out. I then walk off to my room to take a shower. Some people who were in the hostel were going to a bar but as I had literally just checked in so I turned down the offer.

It was too late to do anything so I sat in the tiny common room with a Korean man. He spoke very little English, just enough to communicate with me, he reminded me of the international students at universities back home who could barely speak English. He tells me that he buys and sells shares online, a day trader. He lives in hostels and has been travelling slowly around Ukraine, Moldova and eastern Europe. Our conversation is difficult so I break off to sit in the kitchen with my laptop for the rest of the night. Some people take my place on the sofa and start playing computer games. I wait until it is late before I go to bed.

The next day I wake up and have hostel breakfast, it is raining heavily. I head out to explore the city anyway, I have not seen much rain yet as the weather has been so hot. The rain was running down the cobblestones and the streets were almost empty. I decide to spend the morning walking along side the river and around some nearby parks. I sat on a rope swing for a while and the odd person walks passed carrying an umbrella. I watched as the rain falls heavily in the river.

I eventually turned around and headed into the city centre, the rain was lessening and the sun started to show through the clouds. I ended up in McDonald's again for lunch and purchased some cigars on a whim. I did not actually find that much to do, no museums of interest or monuments. I just walked around for a few hours and then headed back to the hostel.

At the hostel I found the couple I had met last night, we spoke for a while in the kitchen. The man was a few years older than me and from Poland and Naiomi, who was a few years younger than me from Portugal. The man despite being from Poland spoke with a totally neutral accent, as if he had

elocution lessons when he was younger or maybe even went to school in an English speaking country. We swapped backpacking stories and it was at this point that they guessed I had never had sex.

They had both travelled extensively around India, China and South America. I could tell they both came from wealthy families. Hostels are dirty and cheap but I think you still need to have wealth and stability back home in order to travel long term, young wealthy people are more likely to have that. With all the privately educated people I sometimes felt as if I was in an Eaton school reunion. We agreed to catch a bus together in the morning to a place called Sibiu. I had not heard of the city before and on a whim I agreed to travel with them.

Once it started to go dark I headed out on my own to get dinner. I had found a few Italian restaurants in the city centre so I walked into town to take a look. I found one of the restaurants and it looked busy and expensive. Everyone was wearing smart clothes while I was wearing clothes I had been washing in the sink for the last two months. The prices I found were also cheap compared to the UK, even after the pound had dropped in value due to Brexit. I walked in and said I was on my own, surprised the waiter gave me a table for two, the waiter spoke to me in limited English but he seemed very interested in where I was from. He asked what I wanted to drink and I replied asking for a Romanian beer, this made him very happy. He told me that the beer was on the house! I ordered some chicken pasta. Cheap food and free beer, I knew I wanted to stay in Romania longer than I had planned. I ate and drank while playing with a cigar cutter I had purchased earlier. Then I headed back to the hostel.

Once back I found a group of people sitting on a table in the hostel garden, all drinking and smoking in the dark. I decided to join them and sat down on one of the free seats. The group consisted of other solo travellers, mostly American and British but also an Iraqi man who was fleeing his country. I pulled out one of my cigars and started smoking as well. They were all planning on going to a bar later but I declined their offer, I was still avoiding drinking and bars after Krakow. The Korean man from last night walked passed and laughed at me for smoking a cigar. After a few hours the group all left me to go to the bar and I went inside the hostel.

Once inside I sat next to the Korean man and started speaking to him again. He had really poor English but he could describe some of his backpacking stories. He told me about how corrupt Ukraine and Moldova are and that he managed to buy a legitimate Moldovan passport for 300 Euros. He tried to use it a few months prior to fly to the UK but even with a real government issued Moldovan passport he was turned back by British boarder control. He was in the UK for less than an hour before he was placed on a flight back to eastern Europe. I guess a Korean man who can't speak a word of Romanian was a cause for concern. It was late so I went to bed.

Sibiu - 05/05/2017 - 07/05/2017

I woke up the next morning and had hostel breakfast in the small kitchen, the communist couple were already eating. They had dumped all their bags in the small common room almost blocking the hallway. They were only travelling for one week I still don't know why they needed so much stuff. We headed out early and we needed to get some cash from an ATM machine because I doubt the small coach company would accept payment by card. We also went to a super market to buy food and drink for the journey.

Then we started walking towards the bus stop in a rush because we were running late. I'm never normally late travelling on my own. I realised why people travelling in groups are always far more disorganised than solo travellers. It's because a group never knows everyone's exact plan, people in the group always say I need to buy a drink, or go to the toilet, or they forget something and have to go back. All these small surprises to the group hold everyone up making them late. A solo traveller knows they need to get a drink and plans accordingly, unless everyone in the group communicates everything to everyone at all times it can never be as efficient as a solo traveller.

We eventually get to the small coach station and board the bus, all sweaty and disorganised. No single person in the group was at fault, it was the groups fault. I thought to myself that I'm never travelling in a group again. The coach was tiny, basically a minibus with tiny cramped seats and it was full. The communists also had a kindle, not many people I had met travelling were readers. We both sat and read in silence. The bus eventually stopped at a service station, I got out and went to a nearby McDonald's to buy a drink. I noticed the bus drivers friend, a young fat man eating sun flower seeds and spitting out the shells on the ground, he created a mess on the floor. After over an hour of waiting we carried on our journey to Sibiu.

We arrived in Sibiu and made our way from the Autogara 1 - Transmixt bus station to the "Smart Hostel Sibiu". Thankfully it was a short walk. The hostel was strange, the entrance led onto a suspended walkway/ balcony. Almost as if we were walking into what was once a window onto the top floor of the building. We checked in to an empty room and picked our beds. I was too tired to explore the city yet so I went into the common room for a few hours to chill out. The communists were far more tired than me and went to sleep in the same bed. I made small talk to the woman on reception, she had been volunteering all over Europe for years and had no plans to stop.

By the time I had recovered from travelling it had got dark and the communists were still sleeping, I don't think they got up again until the next day. I went back in the room and found two Romanian women from Bucharest, they were studying to be medical doctors and were in Sibiu for a medical conference. I spoke to the one sleeping on the bed above me named Elena and invited her out tomorrow but she told me the conference would last all day and night. She was very interested in my travels and had tons of questions for me. She had never left Romania before and I guess I was the first actual backpacker that she had met.

I went out the hostel to a nearby restaurant/ bar to sit outside drink beer but for some reason they didn't want to serve me so I went to a super market next door. I then made the short walk back to the

hostel and sat outside on the balcony on my own drinking and smoking a cigar. A woman came and sat next to me and she also started smoking, we spoke for a few hours and then I went to bed.

I woke up the next day planning on exploring the city, I did some research the day before and found a place called the ASTRA National Museum Complex that really interested me. It would also give me an excuse to walk across the entire city. I left the hostel and headed south walking for about an hour I found a large cemetery on the edge of the city. I took a detour through the cemetery hoping to be able to come out the other side and continue going south. The cemetery turned out to be larger than I thought, it just kept on going. I started noticing dogs, large looking stray dogs walking around and sleeping on graves. I kept on walking, the ground was still wet from the recent rain and I had to avoid getting my shoes stuck in the mud. I made it to the bottom but I found no way back out. I turned right to see if I could find a way back to the main road in a dark area of the cemetery, it was covered by trees and weeds. I think it was a Jewish section, all of the graves were from before WW2 and were in various states of disrepair. I headed back up to the entrance and back onto the main road.

I carried on walking down the heavily wooded road until I got to the entrance to the museum. It was a type of museum called a living museum, they had de-constructed and moved entire buildings from other parts of the country and placed them into a single area. Lots of old wood buildings, windmills and farm enclosures scattered across the woodland and around a lake. I paid for a ticket and walked around the accompanying small indoor museum, nobody else was here so the security guard decided to just follow me around as I went from room to room. I then exited and went out onto the lake, I spent hours walking around the woods discovering new buildings.

I walked all the way around the woods and decided to have lunch at the restaurant Cârciuma din Bătrâni. I sat outside but I was told they didn't accept card but they would accept Euros, so I paid for my meal in some spare Euros I still had in my wallet. I took the advice of the waiter and ordered some "traditional" Romanian food and beer, I had no idea what it was. After the meal I walked back to the lake and smoked the rest of the cigar from last night.

I walked back into the city and by the time I arrived at the hostel I was spent. I spoke to the communists who were still lying in bed, Naomi said she was ill, they thought from eating a sandwich that was left in the heat for too long. I had walked to the edge of the city and back and they had barely left the hostel all day. Two very different methods of backpacking. I took a shower and then sat in the common room to try and recover.

The common room was empty and it was now dark outside. I did not want to go to bed so I sat up on my own watching Netflix. After a while the Romanian woman Elena from yesterday came into the common room, she was all dressed up from the conference and also a little drunk. She sat on the chair next to me and started talking. At first the conversation was quite normal, we talked about her conference and my travels. I was not expecting to speak to anyone else that night and I had been fully engrossed in Netflix. Now I had deal with an attractive 22 year old student Doctor in an empty common room.

Unbelievably I didn't know it at the time, she was flirting with me. She starts to tell me a story about how she was almost caught having sex in a dormitory before and that she does not mind other people hearing her. She touches my arm, in hindsight expecting me to do something. But I did

nothing. It was terrifying for me, I had a smart attractive woman trying so hard to have sex with me. I didn't know what to do. Eventually she went to have a shower and left me alone. I could not stop shaking. She came out of the shower and said good night. Was she really asking to have sex with me in our hostel dormitory? I went to bed a few hours later.

By the time I woke up Elena had already checked out, she had to catch an early train back to Bucharest. I would be travelling to the city of Brasov, another city recommended to me by the communists. They were staying in Sibiu for another day despite them never leaving their bed. We had all booked into the same hostel in Brasov so would probably meet again tomorrow. When I was packing my bags I found a pair of earrings on my bed, I asked around if anyone had lost them but nobody did. I then realised they must have been Elena's, the one who was trying so desperately to seduce me the previous night, they must have fell onto my bed. I messaged her on Facebook and they were hers, she asked if I could bring them to Bucharest with me, I agreed. I said goodbye to the communists who were still in bed and headed back to the bus station.

Braşov - 07/05/2017 - 10/05/2017

I arrived back at the bus station and boarded a mini bus to Brasov. The bus was again full and a very large woman ended up sitting on the chair next to me, taking up her seat and half of mine. The bus set off and she fell asleep almost immediately. I tried to read my kindle but it was uncomfortable, it was hot and the bus had no A/C or windows that I could open. One of my worst bus journeys. The bus stop was not far from the hostel I was staying called Kismet Dao Hostel. I walked the short way and could not help but notice the large hill in the centre of the city. It had a large cheesy white sign saying Brasov, like a budget Hollywood. I knew I wanted to climb it today.

I checked in and said hello to the hostel dog and headed up the hill as fast as I could. The entrance to the trail had a big sign warning me about bears and wolves that inhabit the area. I thought about my travel insurance, I wonder if it covers bear attack. The sun was already setting when I headed off and I was a little panicked about getting lost on the hill in the dark, I didn't see anyone else on the trail. It took me about an hour to get to the top and there I met a man taking selfies with a stick. He told me a story about how a drunk man had been eaten by wolves on the hill, but that they rarely come so close to the city.

I headed back down as fast as I could in the dark. The trail looped back and forth and I could see smaller paths going straight down, cutting out most of the trail. They were very steep but I thought someone uses them so they must be safe. I started walking on this steep path and very quickly I slipped and started falling fast down the side of the hill, I tried to grab onto roots and plants but nothing held, nor could I dig my feet into the ground. I can't remember how long I was sliding down this hill, it was probably only 5 seconds, but in my memory it felt much longer. I slid straight onto the dirt path below me, stood up with my heart racing thankful the trail continued on below me. I checked to see if I had any big injuries, waiting to see if I could feel pain. I had cut both of my hands trying to grab onto plants and dirt, they were not bad but they were bleeding and I had no first aid to clean them. I walked the short way to the bottom and back in the dark to the hostel.

Once back I cleaned my hands using anti bacterial wipes from my first aid kit and had a shower. I stayed up for a few hours in the kitchen with an American woman that had rented a car. The kitchen had a large number of those Ikea mugs that are so common in hostels in Europe. The big tourist sights it turned out were castles owned by Dracula, I however was not really interested in making the effort to go and see them. By the sounds of it I would have had to take a tour and I hated tours. I went to bed.

The next day I woke up and had hostel breakfast, the kitchen was really busy. I had no plans for today so I spent the morning walking around the city centre and the castle walls. The weather was terrible, it was raining all day but the fog that was created sat over the city. All the castle walls and towers were surrounded by a dense layer of fog, I had never seen anything like it before. I went back to the hostel early and read my kindle, the hostel told me that if I take the hostel dog for a walk on the hill they would give me a free beer. It was a very large dog, maybe an Irish Wolfhound and very friendly. I turned down their offer as I did not want the responsibility to take such a big dog in the woods.

Once it was dark I headed out to a nearby supermarket to buy food, just outside the hostel I found the communist couple who had just arrived. We briefly said hello and I carried on out. Once back I ate food in the kitchen while socialising with the communists. I wondered if they would leave the hostel at all in Brasov.

The next day the rain did not stop, I was glad that I climbed the hill on my first day. I probably would not have done it in this rain. It was raining so much almost nobody in the hostel went out and several of us had congregated in the basement common room watching DVDs. We spent the whole day eating and drinking in the hostel. When it was dark we did a beer run together at the nearby supermarket. The communists invited me to stay another day with them in Brasov but I really wanted to get down to Greece, I knew that I was travelling slower than I had planned. But we had a chance to meet up again on my last day in Bucharest. We all eventually went to bed, one of the most boring days I had backpacking.

Bucharest - 10/05/2017 - 12/05/2017

I woke up in Brasov, had hostel breakfast, checked out and walked down to the coach station. I made sure this time that the mini bus had A/C and boarded to Bucharest. I don't remember much about the bus journey but I arrived in the city quite early, it was still sunny and incredibly hot. I had a long walk from the bus station to the hostel I had booked called "Podstel". I walked passed the large "Palace of the Parliament" building and then around what looked to be the centre of the city and the park called Parcul Unirii. Then I walked down and into the suburbs of Bucharest.

My first impressions of the city were bad, it did not even feel like a European city. Cars were parked everywhere and anywhere, blocking even the main street in the city centre. In London or any UK city these cars would have been towed away long ago. I found cars in various states of disrepair, cars with no tires on, cars that looked almost burnt out in the city centre! I didn't know how a city so disorganised could exist in Europe or how people do any business here.

The hostel was like a hippy commune with people doing yoga outside and everyone had to take their shoes off before going in. I noticed a motorbike near the entrance of the hostel with a little British flag on, maybe someone on a road trip. A cat was sitting on the seat of the motorbike. I checked in and messaged the Romanian woman Elena I had met in Sibiu that I had arrived and she could pick up her earrings tomorrow.

Once I had a shower and was recovered I went out to a super market to buy some beer. It was now getting dark and I wanted to chill out in the common room and garden. I found a shop and bought two beers but also decided to buy two little bottles of wine. Then I went back to the hostel.

I sat down in the common room for two or three hours a man and a woman came over and sat next to me. The woman seemed normal but something about the man seemed strange. He was dressed in black and looked dopey, his eyes were dull, like he had nothing behind them. Hopefully for him he was just on drugs and this was not his default state. He kept saying how backpacking in Europe was terrible compared to Asia. The woman always apologising to me for his behaviour. I asked why he was even here if he hated it so much but he could not give me a specific reason. He stated that the backpackers in Asia are just more fun than in Europe. I then told them about the Communist couple I was travelling with and he also proudly declared his support for Communism, not that I asked him for his opinion.

Non of these people realising how much damage and death has been caused by that ideology. I guessed he was just another wealthy kid travelling on his parents money. He got annoyed by my criticism of Communism and thankfully left. The woman apologised to me one last time, she herself had only just met him but she felt the need to apologise for his attitude and for bringing him over to me. I got intoxicated and then went outside in the dark, poorly lit garden to smoke the last of my cigars. Then I went to bed.

The next day I set out to explore the city, I walked back into the centre and spent some time walking around the shopping mall there. Then I headed around to the Palace of Parliament and down to the Nation's Heroes Memorial where I found a group of people building what looked to be a wooden

half pipe for skateboarding. Then I continued on to the Parcul Tineretului walking around the lake. Then finally I went back to the hostel. A long day of walking as I found no museums or other sights that interested me.

Once back at the hostel I relaxed in the common room until it was time to meet up with Elena and hand back her earrings. I also had to get lunch and I wanted to eat in a restaurant while I was in the city. We agreed to meet near McDonald's because it had WiFi, it was always difficult meeting up with someone with no data and McDonald's always had free WiFi. We met up and I handed back her earrings, I asked to take her out for dinner but unfortunately she declined. We kept in contact on Facebook and it appeared I had a big influence on her. Within a few years she herself had went backpacking long term in both Egypt and South America. Finally leaving her country for the first time.

We said good bye and I went off to find some food. I had a few restaurants in mind before I set off but everyone of them looked really busy and I was not interested in waiting. Because they were so busy they may have even refused me as on my own I would have had to take up at least a two person table. I found what looked to be a busy fast food restaurant selling pasta and ordered some to take away. Then headed back to the hostel and to bed.

Sofia - 12/05/2017 - 15/05/2017

I woke up with no significant plans, I knew I had to catch a bus to Sofia at around 3pm but I had the whole morning free. I packed my stuff had hostel breakfast and spent the rest of the morning reading in the hostel common room. I was hoping to bump into the Communist couple again as I knew they were due in Bucharest today, but they never came. At about 1pm I headed to the city centre to get snacks for the bus and also withdraw cash because I just knew the bus station wouldn't accept credit card.

I got to Parcul Unirii got snacks from Carrefour and noodles from a Chinese takeaway place. Then walked up to one of the ATM machines from a bank that I recognised and tried to withdraw money for the bus. But the ATM machine rejected my card, I tried again and no luck. I then walked over to another ATM and again my card was rejected. I quickly walked away and phoned my bank. I knew if I couldn't withdraw money I would miss my bus and as it was already early afternoon it would probably mean another day in Romania. I walked into a quiet side street and was kept on hold for 15 minutes. If I even manage to catch this bus I knew it would be very close. The bank answered and confirmed my card should work, they told me to try another ATM so I walked over to another bank that I recognised and it worked. The woman on the phone said maybe the ATM machine had just lost connection or something.

I looked at my watch and knew I should probably run if I wanted to make it on time. So I jogged back to the hostel, not a problem after all the exercise I had over the past 2 months. I got back to the hostel and did a half hearted walk around just in case the Communist couple had arrived but unfortunately I did not see them. I picked up my big backpack and started the walk to the coach station, it was called Autogara Filaret and just south of the hostel. It had a large high roofed building that covered the coaches, quite unusual.

I walked in and very quickly paid for the bus, as expected they did not accept credit card. The bus was already waiting as I walked outside, I separated my valuables, placed the big backpack in the storage under the bus and got on board. After waiting for a few minutes another backpacker gets on board and sits on the chairs next to me. I introduce myself, he was a tall Brazilian man named Leonardo, a few years older than myself and making his way down to Istanbul. It turned out we had both planned to spend 3 days in Sofia so we agreed to meet up tomorrow.

Half way to Sofia the bus stops at what I think was a Bulgarian version of a motorway service station. Lots of small fast food shops and a convenience store. We get off the bus and have a walk around, I don't even know what the currency is yet and I did not trust the little ATM machine to withdraw any. This far in eastern Europe it was rare to find shops that take credit card so I went without food. I noticed the bus driver very efficiently order food, sit at a little table outside and eat all within 20 minutes. He must do this everyday. I did not dare try and order food as I know I will be too slow and miss the bus.

By the time I got to Sofia it was late, around 10:30pm on a Friday night so the streets were busy. I had paid for one night in a hostel because I was unsure what my plans would be once I got here, it was called "Hostel Mostel". I parted ways with the Leonardo as we were walking in opposite

directions. I started the walk, the bus had dropped me off near the train station and I had to walk into the city centre to get to my hostel. I walked down a main street and across the beautiful Lion's Bridge, the other side was even busier, drunk people partying on the streets. I was really hungry, I had not had a proper meal all day so when I walked passed McDonald's I could not help myself, plus it would have WiFi after all. The street near McDonald's was full of grand old looking buildings of a very different culture from Western Europe. Inside McDonald's was busy with people coming in from bars, I parked my backpack on one of the chairs with everyone looking at me. Once I had ate I continued walking down to the hostel.

I reached the hostel a short while after. It was in a square surrounded by concrete buildings and it looked similar to a motel in the USA. It looked really nice and also totally out of place. I walked in and spoke to the reception, the woman was puzzled, she told me the hostel was fully booked and they were not expecting to check anyone else in. It was 11pm on a Friday and I thought if they were overbooked I might have difficulty finding any where to sleep tonight. The receptionist spent 5 minutes looking on her computer before finally finding my reservation and confirming they had my bed still available. I paid for the night and then asked about the possibility of staying a few more nights, but I was told the hostel would be fully booked and I should probably look else where as cancellations were unlikely.

I walked to my room, opened the door and turned the light on. It was a really good room, each bed had a curtain however it was small for the number of beds. Immediately an old naked man in his bed pulled back his curtain and looked at me angrily pointing while speaking to me in a language I could not recognise. The room looked empty except for him, although you can never know who is watching or listening to you behind all the curtains. I did not understand him so I gestured the universal shrug for what. It was still relatively early for hostels on a Friday night but I tried to be as fast as I could but I still had to take a shower. The naked man continues shouting and gesturing at me as I unpack my bag to get my towel and toiletry bag.

I leave the room to go find the shower block and make sure to turn off the light, as I close the door the man goes back behind his curtain. I have a quick shower and brush my teeth, I was very groggy from travelling and rushing around all day. I walked back to my room, I was lazy and did not put my shoes back on properly, standing on the backs and almost tripping up walking on the hostels balcony. Nor did I dress properly, just my boxer shorts on with my towel wrapped around my waist, it was dark and late outside but still warm. I once again open the door to my room and turn on the light, immediately the naked man again opened his curtain and shouted at me. I'm not sure how he expected me to navigate the room in the dark with the floor covered in other peoples backpacks, shoes and clothing. He had a curtain anyway, I found out later it blocked almost all of the light out from the room.

I dumped my dirty clothes in the corner and turned off the light, no doubt to the joy of the naked man. I then climbed up the ladders and lay in bed. The novelty of having a curtain saved me from going back to the common room, I spent an hour catching up with the news and eventually went to sleep.

I woke up early to make sure I could find somewhere else to sleep, I packed my stuff, checked out at reception and went to sit in the common room. No hostels were available in Sofia, but I did find a

Guest house called Elysia Homestay, and it was cheap. So I headed back up towards the Lions Bridge and then took a right.

The guest house had large metal gates that I opened cautiously, then I walked around the back, it almost looked like a regular house with children's toys in the garden. An elderly man greeted me and he could not speak English, he managed the odd word but he could not form sentences. I ended up paying for two nights but he tried to overcharge me, I tried to explain I have already paid online but he did not understand. It was a relatively small amount of money anyway so I didn't think it was worth angering my host and just paid him. He showed me upstairs and to my surprise I was placed in a room with three beds, all these hostels made me certain that I was going to have to share. I asked him and after a few rewording the question a few times he laughed and said "All yours". For the first time in over a month I would have a room to myself. It even had a private bathroom!

I wasted no time in washing my clothes in the sink and put them out to dry on some chairs. I logged onto the WiFi and spoke to the Leonardo from the bus, we would meet up and explore Sofia together. Normally in hostels I have a locker of some sort to place my valuables, but having a room to myself the owners could just walk in and pick my bags. I decided to hide my valuables under the freshly made beds to offer me a little peace of mind.

I agreed to meet Leonardo in a Costa Coffee opposite the City Garden and I arrived first. I looked at the menu on the wall and it was in a totally different alphabet, every country I had been to so far used Latin so I could always pronounce words and most of the time make an educated guess at them. Stunned a little I managed to order a latte and started reading my Kindle. Leonardo would take a while. It was almost an hour later when he would make an appearance, I did not care much because I was enjoying taking it easy for once. We spoke for bit and walked out, he got coffee to go. We quickly walked passed the Ivan Vazov National Theatre, we didn't know what it was at the time, only it was a very imposing and foreign building covered in gold with two chariots either side.

We spent a few hours walking around the markets in the area, surprised to see guns, knives and pictures of Adolf Hitler for sale. Eventually we got to the Alexander Nevsky Cathedral and turned back on ourselves to head into the city centre to get lunch. We walked down what I believe is the main high street, the mountain Vitosha still snow capped in the distance. We walked passed lots of restaurants until we found one that looked busy and sat down on a table outside. The table behind us I noticed two older English men also eating and drinking. It was too loud to hear what they were talking about but they also noticed that I was English. I did not think much of it other than they were the first English people I had seen in Sofia.

We ordered food and beer. I had noticed the large amount of people wearing items of clothing with the Union Jack on. Every few minutes someone would walk by with the flag on a t-shirt or a tote bag. I told Leonardo and he didn't believe me but a few minutes later we both see a man wearing it on a t-shirt. Maybe Bulgarians like the UK? After eating we carry on walking down the street until we arrived at the National Palace of Culture where we spend about an hour walking around the nearby park. We then decide to head back for a few hours and agree to meet up later to find a bar. We walk back a bit and go off our separate ways, I walk back up to the Lions Bridge and to my guest house.

When I arrive back at the guest house a woman and I presume her young son, about 8 or 10 years old are outside in the garden. I say hello and introduce myself,

She asks "Where are you from?"

"England." I say.

She replies with "No, where are you from?"

I repeat "I'm from England."

She almost goes into shock, surprised she says.

"Oh I'm sorry, my English must sound so bad to you."

I guess she doesn't get many English people staying with her.

I spend 15 minutes playing football with the child, he actually spoke some English as well. The woman was encouraging him to practise his English with me. Then I head back inside to my room, jump in the shower and catch up with the news.

It eventually got dark, time to meet back up with Leonardo the Brazilian guy. I walked to the hotel he said he was staying at and waited in a nearby bar, only the bar was so full they were refusing customers. So I sit outside to wait, yet he still does not come out and I have no data or WiFi. After 20 minutes I walk around the area to see if I can find some free WiFi to message him. He then comes down stairs and apologises, he was apparently getting some work done.

He tells me he has big plans for tonight! And then he shows me a list of clubs he was recommended by his friend in Berlin. So we start walking around Sofia and I completely lose orientation, the streets were full of people and it was in areas of Sofia I had yet to explore. We stop and get food at a street vendor, probably some form of Kebab. We had been walking around for an hour and every time he tried to direct us to one of his clubs we would get lost in quiet back alleys or busy roads. We decide to give up on the list and walk back into the centre where it was busy with people. We eventually settle on a really busy bar we had walked passed over an hour ago, it had lots of out door seating.

We walk in and stand next to the bar, and right beside us are the two older English men from earlier in the day. We started speaking, one was a Solicitor and another a medical doctor and university lecturer from the University of Cambridge. They were in Sofia for the weekend after apparently giving a lecture at the University of Sofia. When we arrived they had already been here for a few hours and were getting bored and about to leave.

Within a few minutes they were buying us drinks, in hindsight this was probably for their entertainment after being bored sitting on their own. They asked if I wanted a whisky, I said yes why not? I told them I had not tried Whisky yet and they were both surprised and made a joke about me being a child and having small testicles. The female bar tender poured the whisky for all four of us but did not ask for payment, for the next few hours the English men would order us drinks and they would not pay. The bar was forgetting to ask for payment and no matter what they did they could not get the attention of the bar tenders.

After drinking 2 or 3 beers, whisky and a cocktail I was getting drunk. Really drunk. Krakow levels of drunk. The men were both around 50 years old and married with children but were still looking to hook up with women. Apparently they had no luck in the bar before we arrived, they told me that the atmosphere was wrong. They came up with this plan to go to a strip club, I had never been to a strip club before so again why not I thought? The Leonardo approaches the bar tender and asks for any recommendations and she gives us each a card, we tip her and head out of the bar.

Leonardo warns me that strip clubs in Sofia might be dangerous, probably controlled by the mafia, so I would need to be careful. But I was not very concerned about my safety, I had managed to navigate around some risky situations before and have always managed to get back to my room. We stumble around some streets as Leonardo directs us to the strip club. It was only about a 5 minute walk and we ended up outside what looked to be like a cinema. We walked in and a group of bouncers were there, Leonardo handled everything and we were in. I was too drunk to be concerned about the risks. I was going to a strip club for the first time in a country I had only been in for a day with three total strangers. What could go wrong?

We enter the club and it had what looked to be a stage in the middle, just like a strip club from a film. But I also noticed the large amount of women who were drinking and dancing. It took maybe 10 seconds to realise this was not a strip club, just a regular one. The older guys were the most disappointed. The place was called the Carrusel club and was overflowing with locals heavily drinking and dancing to loud electronic music. The club itself was converted from a traditional theatre, it had balcony seats on the upper floor and two bars, one near the entrance and one forming a square in the centre of the theatre where people would have originally sat.

We walk over to the bar and they buy us yet another round of drinks and I guess I started dancing. I quickly lost track of Leonardo and two English guys and I end up dancing with a group of Bulgarians. They couldn't speak much English but for some reason very happy to see an English person. I sat down with them at a table, and they were smoking cigarettes inside the night club, not something I had seen before. Just as I finished the miscellaneous cocktail the English guys ordered for me the Bulgarians filled my glass up to the top with straight vodka. I drank the whole thing.

I then went to go find the others, they were on the other side and had already pre-bought me another drink and were now trying to pick up women. I watched as the university lecturer, despite probably being too old for the club try and flirt with much younger women. He did it very intensely, lots of touching and smooth movements, something he must have been very practised at doing. I felt it was uncomfortable as the women often clearly did not want the attention.

I was now very drunk and went to sit down in a corner of the night club on my own. The lights and music were dancing around my head, similar to how I later experienced when taking a small dose of psilocybin mushrooms, they really do talk to you. I realised I was way too drunk. A few hours went by with me dancing with the Bulgarians but people began to leave and the club started to empty out. I realised it was probably time for me to leave as well. I had a quick look to see if I could find my group but they were no where to be found so I yet again stumbled outside into the dark on my own.

I got my compass out and I was so drunk I took my phone out and started filming myself. I had never done this before and have no idea why I did it then. After walking for a few minutes filming myself I walk passed a fast food shop and just as I pass I notice the person buying food is Leonardo!

He must have just left the club a few minutes before me, he was getting food and in a much better state than myself. He tried to give me some, concerned about how drunk I was, but I wasn't hungry in the slightest. I said good bye and carried on walking back to my guest house, worried it could be locked and I would have to sleep outside.

I eventually get back as the sun was rising and thankfully it was not locked. I walk up to my room and collapse in bed. I did not sleep all night, too much alcohol I think. I spend the night turning over and over again until mid day. Then it hits me, I feel sick, maybe the alcohol, maybe the lack of sleep, probably a combination of the two. I rush to the bath room and vomit in the toilet until nothing is left and then some more. My head feels like glass, even worse than I had experienced that day back in Krakow. At least then I had managed to go and get Perogies for lunch, today I would not leave my room until 6pm. I spent the whole day vomiting and trying to sleep, only I had no water. I went down stairs and bumped into the elderly man who checked me in, I asked if I could drink the tap water and he said yes but it had a bad taste. I tried a glass and my god, I had never drank such bad tasting water in my life. But it was all I had as I did not yet have the energy to leave my room.

I realised I was in a very poor situation, I emailed my parents to tell them I think I have food poisoning, just to prepare them if something does happen. Possibly my worst day I experienced while backpacking and it led me to take a vow never to drink hard alcohol again.

In the evening I got enough strength to go outside to get proper drinking water and food, it was only a 2 minute walk back to the Lions Bridge where I could go to KFC and Billa supermarket. I got dressed and headed out to the supermarket first as I would not be allowed to bring KFC into the supermarket. I grabbed some chocolate wafers that are so popular in Europe and a huge bottle of water. Standing in the queue I say hello to some Americans who were buying alcohol, they invited me to come along with them but I declined, I was no where close to being in the right state for another drinking session. I then headed to KFC and purchased a meal and walked back to the guest house. I spent the rest of the evening re-hydrating and went to sleep.

The next day I wake up early, have a shower and pack my bags. As I leave my room the next door opens as well and Leonardo steps out. We look at each other both surprised, we were sleeping in the same guest house with either of us not knowing. He, like me had difficulty finding some where to sleep and had to move places. We check out together and for some reason he wants to get Chinese food for lunch at a nearby restaurant. We walk down and I let him order for me, not really being hungry I did not care much. We then walked back to Lions Bridge to eat on a bench. I did not like the food, I was not even sure what it was, but he seemed to like it. After I told him I was listening to the band Accept, we both talked about our love for German and British Heavy metal bands.

We then walked back up to the bus station, the one we had arrived at together 3 days before. My bus to Thessaloniki was arriving first and he was going onto Istanbul. I had not booked anywhere to stay in Thessaloniki and decided to quickly book a single night using the free WiFi in case I have difficulty once I get there. My bus was apparently delayed, my departure time came and went and I still did not see the bus. I did a quick run around all of the buses in the station to see if any said Thessaloniki on the front but no luck. Eventually 15 or 20 minutes after my departure time the bus turned up, I said good bye to the Brazilian and got on board.

Thessaloniki - 15/05/2017 - 18/05/2017

I arrived in Thessaloniki at the Macedonia Intercity Bus Station, a large domed building almost like a storage building or the Roman Pantheon. It was early afternoon and it was very hot. I walked outside and I had the option of taking a bus into the centre or walking. Like always I decided to walk. I knew that it would take about an hour to walk to the hostel but I could also get lunch on the way. I head out and almost immediately see a Lidl, I go buy snacks, fruit and some chocolate milk. Glad to be using the Euro again, no more mystery currencies in Greece.

I keep walking, the area around the bus station was full with new buildings, shops and empty space but the closer I got to the city the older everything looked. Eventually I started walking up steep hills, on roads scarcely wide enough for a small car. This was clearly the cities old town, modern streets would not be laid out like this. As I got closer to the hostel I walked passed what looked to be an old two story house that had partially collapsed, I worried slightly about the safety of the area.

After about an hour I arrived at the hostel called Studios Arabas and was greeted by a tall ginger man on reception. I struck up a conversation about how he managed to survive in Greece with so much sun, he was covered in freckles and more than a little sun burnt. He was from Northern Ireland, a few years older than me and volunteering in the hostel. He checks me in and walks me to another building where I would be sleeping. It looked like a nice hostel but had a tiny common room.

My room was empty when I arrived and I placed my backpack under my bed and headed out. Despite being tired from the long bus and walking everywhere I wanted to go to the docks because I had yet to see the Mediterranean sea on my trip. I walked back down the hills of old town, into the centre; a very modern looking city centre compared to my recent experiences in Bulgaria and Romania. It was early evening, the streets were not that busy and the shops were closing for the day. I walked passed the Roman Agora and carried on until I got to the sea, I was getting hungry so I decided to look for something quick to eat. I backtracked a little until I found a little shop selling pasta and ordered some. I then went to sit at the docks with my legs hanging over the edge. It was almost totally dark by this point and the waves of the sea in the twilight remained me of something alien from the War of The Worlds.

After I ate the pasta I carried on until I got to the Alexander the Great statue. I celebrated a little knowing I had reached my goal of travelling all the way to Greece. I walked a little further, this area of the city was busy with people drinking and eating. I thought about getting a beer myself but after Sofia I thought better of it and walked back to the hostel. When I got back the common room was closed, some people were sitting outside and I set up my laptop and watched Netflix. The area had no lighting and it was so dark I could not even look into my backpack without having to use my phone as a torch. I was annoyed that the common room closed so early I went to bed. I went to the building next door, entered my room and a few people were asleep so I was quiet. I placed my backpack with my laptop in it under my bed and went to sleep myself.

The next day I knew I wanted to go and see some museums. Thessaloniki has a long history, from Greeks, Romans, Byzantines and Turks. I just knew they would have some good museums. The

weather in Greece was similar to Sofia, hot and sunny. But for some reason here I had hayfever, I get pretty bad pollen allergies and I was not prepared for them so early in the year. I made sure to carry tons of tissues before leaving the hostel and I made a stop at a pharmacy. They recommended some medication that appeared to be for colds, not hayfever but I gave it a try.

I walked back down to the city centre and back to the Statue of Alexander the Great. I then spent the morning and early afternoon visiting the Archaeological Museum of Thessaloniki and The Museum of Byzantine Culture. The museums were almost empty, I was alone in most of the rooms and corridors. The whole time walking around the two museums I was sneezing, just trying to manage my allergy took away my focus. I then headed back up to the centre, stopping by at the Arch of Galerius and the Rotunda. My hayfever was so bad I decided to go back to the pharmacy, on some free WiFi I found my normal medication and they gave me an alternative, which worked better. I then went back to the hostel to have a shower and put on new clothes.

When it got dark I walked back down to the coast, the city was so busy and the bars looked fun. I had not met anyone in Greece yet and was a little annoyed I could not explore the city with someone. It was late by the time I got back to the hostel and went to bed.

The next day I had planned to do a long walk on the hills around the old town. It was hot and despite my hayfever I set off on a really long walk. All day I was walking in convenience stores to buy a drink. I started making my way to Vlatadon Monastery, I was told by the hostel that it had good views of the city. I then walked up to the Alysseos Tower and Acropolis of Thessaloniki but it was far busier than I expected with the small roads giving the tourist buses a hard time. I found a place where the walls were falling down and you could just climb ontop of them, not something that would be allowed in the UK.

I then carried on walking along the hills until houses turned into trees. I was unsure if I would be able to walk back down to the city from here as I was walking along side a motorway. But I found a dirt road running next to the motorway that looked promising. I followed it down and I was glad I did, the views of the city were very clear, I could see all the way to the coast. I followed the winding paths all the way back down to civilisation and then went to get food. I found it was so hot the back of my neck was burning, the baseball style hat I purchased in Frankfurt was not working well enough. I needed something bigger, something floppier. I found a large discount sport clothing shop and purchased a light weight beige coloured floppy hat, the kind I imagined explorers would wear. It would serve me well, but everyone else I would meet hated it (I still love it).

Just at the entrance to the old town I came across a large dog covered in blood, I looked around and found that it had just killed a cat, it's lifeless body a few meters away. The dog still panting and excited with drops of blood all over the floor. I carefully walked around the wild looking dog and made my way up to the hostel and sat in the common room eating more of those chocolate wafers. In the evening it started raining really heavily, but it was still warm outside. I watched as the rain rushed down the steep cobblestone road outside the hostel. I decided it would be an interesting time to explore the old town, it was dark outside and the area had limited street lighting. I put my floppy hat on to protect me from the rain and spent a few hours walking up and down the hilly roads of old town. I found a few bars and eventually got the courage to sit down and order a beer at one.

Once I got back to the hostel I met two American women in our room. I was shocked at how both were travelling around Europe long term while only being 18 years old, I thought they looked even younger than that. I congratulated them for being so brave and went to bed. I woke up in the morning and packed my bags as I was leaving the city today. I had been particularly messy in this hostel and my belongings were strewn all over the floor.

Mount Olympus - 18/05/2017 - 21/05/2017

"A sedentary life is the real sin against the Holy Spirit. Only those thoughts that come by walking have any value."

— **Friedrich Nietzsche**

I made the walk back to the train station that was near the bus station I had been dropped off at 3 days earlier. It was a long walk and still hot outside I was glad that I had purchased the new hat and hayfever medication. I was apprehensive about how my hayfever would be in the forests on and around Mount Olympus, even in a port city it was driving me mad.

It was a short train to the town of Litochoro, the starting point for walking up the mountain. The station itself and my hostel were a few miles outside of town, on a pebble beach looking into the Aegean sea. When I arrived the place looked abandoned, I didn't notice anyone else stepping off the train and there were no buildings or people. I made the walk along the coast to where my hostel was situated, on Google maps it looked like a small cluster of buildings near the opening of a river. The hostel itself was called Summit Zero, a reference to the areas most popular activity.

After about 20 minutes of walking I neared a collection of buildings the opened up into a circle. I walked around the circle, noticing a few empty restaurants and eventually came across the hostel. It was a very distinct building with a balcony and exposed stairs. I opened the gate to a wire fence that ran around the building and was greeted by a number of dogs that were living in the hostel. I walked around trying to find the reception as the dogs ran and playfully jumped on me. The door that looked like a reception was locked, I knocked but the building looked empty, non of the hustle and bustle of most hostels. I walked around the back onto the garden, the grass lawn being so near the sea was merging into the sand, as if it was being eaten up.

After a few minutes a man from reception let me in. I ask him where everyone else is but he replies I was the only guest but he expected more to arrive later. He told me not many people want to climb the mountain so early into the year as it is still topped with snow. I had done no research what so ever on this mountain, the only reason I was here was because of that Greek woman I had briefly met in Krakow told me I should go. It dawned on me that maybe this was a bad idea, I had never climbed a mountain before. I was checked in and found my bed up stairs in an empty room. I had noticed that despite being so close to Thessaloniki my hayfever had gone.

I went down stairs to sit in the common room for a few minutes, shortly after an English couple entered the hostel reception. I said hello, they were both taller than me, about my age, from the south of England and were clearly upper class. They were in Greece for a week and also had plans to climb the mountain, they had came significantly more prepared than myself. The hostel had a little brown dog, somewhat like my Jack Russell back home. It was jumping all over me as I was sitting on one of the sofas and biting everything. Just like my dog when he was a pup. I asked reception about recommendations for food and was directed to either of the two restaurants located in the circular cul de sac. I was a little disappointed by the hostels recommendations, both

restaurants were completely empty but for some reason fully staffed. I guess it was still the low season but I had always avoided empty restaurants.

I walked outside and walked to both the restaurants, they had similar menus with similar prices. I picked the first one and went inside, it was quite a large restaurant, maybe 20 or 30 tables all totally empty. Some of the staff were sitting outside drinking and talking, maybe a family restaurant I thought. I ordered a diet coke and it came in one of those tiny glass bottles they often have in restaurants. The menu had a large selection of sea food, almost entirely sea food, which made sense given its location. But having spent my life in the midlands far from the sea the idea of eating crab or lobster was like having to eat a bowl full of insects. I ordered chicken and chips. The food came and it was good, the chips were fried like my nan used to make. I paid up and then went back to the hostel with the idea of going for a swim in the sea.

I went to my room to put on my shorts, I met the English couple and they also had the same idea. We walked outside the hostel and I noticed just how pale I was with no shirt on. I hadn't spent any great length of time topless, and being outside with other people really made me stand out like a ghost or a vampire. I had also covered myself in suntan lotion but I still felt myself being burnt by the sun. I don't understand peoples love for beaches, inhospitable places covered in rubbish and sea weed. The dogs had also followed us out, they seem to have free reign over the little hamlet.

I got to where the sea washes up on the beach and took off my shoes, it was a pebble beach and just walking on it bare foot hurt as the medium sized stones dug into my feet. I also found I had another problem, the little bitey Jack Russell dog had a fascination with toes, as soon as it saw mine it attacked. My dog back home did the same thing the first time he saw toes, he barked at them for a few minutes thinking they were some grub like creature. I quickly jumped into the sea knowing the dog would not follow me. The water was still too cold to swim comfortably, at least for skinny me.

I spoke with the couple about our plans for the mountain, I was unsure if I would join them or make my own way. They had plans to leave the hostel at 6am, and well, that did not sound enjoyable to me. So I did not commit to following them. The mountain range lay in the distance, I could see it was still heavily snow capped. The sea and beach got boring fast and within 30 minutes I was walking back to the hostel.

I wanted to get some snacks for tonight as I knew it would be quiet once it got dark, reception told me about a small convenience store down the road. So I changed clothes and had a walk into the hamlet. As I left the hostel I was followed by three of the dogs, every few minutes a dog would see me on the street and follow me. By the time I got to the little shop I was being followed by 6 dogs, all running circles around me. The shop itself was really ad hoc, an old woman at the counter and the food was just heaped on tables. I got some chocolate wafers, crisps and some coke and headed back. The dogs had not waited for me.

When it got dark it got dark fast, no street lights or even outdoor lights in the hostel. Two more people had checked in and were unpacking their bags in my room, both from England. A slim man of east Asian descent called Tommy and a short podgy man from South East Asia called Ashraf. They told me they were both mountain climbers who were only in Greece for 2 days to conquer the mountain. They had in fact only booked a single night in the hostel and were planning on climbing

it tomorrow, spending a 2nd night in the hostel on the mountain and flying back to England the next day.

I was surprised at how rushed they were, their itinerary was so busy I had concerns they would miss a flight. But they were both kitted out in branded climbing gear, boots, backpacks, all immaculately clean, as if they had both walked into the same shop and purchased everything together. They knew all the routes up the mountain and the names of its peaks. They invited me to join them but they were also planning on getting up at 6am.... I decided I would make my own way to the top. I went to bed early but did not sleep well.

The next day I was woken up by Tommy and Ashraf in my room packing stuff at 5am. I briefly thought about getting up to join them, but only briefly. I could hear the English couple who were in the room opposite us also getting up, they organised to all climb it together. After they left I went back to sleep until about 10am, I decided that I really needed to leave else I might not make it to the mountain side hostel. I had no idea what to expect or what my plans would be, I had no map and by the time I had showered and ate food it was already 11am. The hostel reception was empty so I decided to try and hitch hike into town.

I was told about how cold it gets at the top of the mountain so I knew I had to bring my big wool coat and wool jumper, both bulky, heavy and not entirely water proof. My shoes were flat bottomed, light weight running shoes; any grip they had before had totally worn away during my 3 months of walking around cities. I put my jumper in my day bag but with my coat being so bulky I could not fit it in as well. I took some paracord I had with me and tied my coat to the outside of the bag, carrying it like a cape behind me. I would stand out as being unprepared at the mountain side hostel.

I set off on the empty road and put my thumb out at every car that came passed, I had no luck. After 15 minutes of walking a police car pulled over and a man got out, asked me what I wanted and then told me off. He got back in the police car and carried on towards the town, I already knew hitch hiking was legal in Greece so I was not that worried. After another 5 minutes of walking I was in luck a car pulled over and I jumped in, my first successful and "real" attempt at hitch hiking. He had a nice car and was wearing smart clothes, a sharp shirt and trousers. I told him I was walking up the mountain and he was really excited for me. He apparently lives in Litchoro and climbs it every year. We got to the town and I thanked him for the lift.

But I still had no idea what or where I should go. I found a bakery and purchased some food and a couple bottles of water. I spent 30 minutes just walking around the town but eventually found the road heading up. I was not sure how long it would take to get to the top but I knew it would be a long walk, I realised why everyone else had set out so early. After about 30 minutes of walking a car drove by and I put out my thumb, hoping to get a lift all the way to where the road stops. I was told of a restaurant where I could get food there. For the 2nd time today I was in luck, the car pulled over and a man, who I remember thinking was speaking Russian enthusiastically ordered me into the car. It certainly did not sound like he was speaking Greek, but maybe it was a different dialect, he seemed to know the area well. The car was old and had knitted wool covers over the chairs. He did not speak a word of English, I sat quietly in the back hoping we were going in the right direction.

He was driving for ages, maybe almost an hour before we got to the end of the road, I felt lucky as I knew it would have taken me all day to walk here. I thanked him and walked into the restaurant at the beginning of the trail up the mountain. I sat down and ordered some food, I remember it was like a soup or stew, but it was good. I filled my water bottle and headed up, I could see into the distance and I realised how high I already was.

I started walking up the narrow dirt footpath, I was told that it would take around 3 hours to reach the hostel and it was only 2pm. I knew I should be okay, I had 4 bottles full of water but it still felt as if I was walking into the unknown. After walking for about 20 minutes I awkwardly meet a man in front of me who is walking at a pace that was only slightly slower than my own. Meaning I can't really over take him, but to follow him means I had to walk just a little slower than I was comfortable with. We reach an outdoor seating area with a water fountain, despite having four bottles of water I was drinking constantly. I asked if he thought it was good to drink, it looked clean and I took a risk and filled up one of my empty bottles, not knowing if I would need it.

We sat and spoke for a while, he spoke very good English, so good I was unsure what country he was from. He told me he was living in Greece and had a few days off work so he had booked into a hotel in Litochoro. He was however, not planning on climbing to the top, he would turn back when he decided he had walked high enough. I told him about my travels, like many people I met he had lots of questions. How did I manage to travel for so long? How difficult was it? How much does it cost? I told him about the concept of hostels, like me he did not know about them, or how cheap they were. He was older than me, about 29 years old and like me he seemed to have had an isolated life. I warned him that if he wanted to go travelling he should do it now while he is still in his 20s. Being over 30 years old in a youth hostel would be a strange experience I thought.

We carried on walking up together for about another hour and we got to another seating area. I believe it was almost half way to the hostel. He told me that he was going back down as he had enough. Before we parted ways he said that I had really inspired him and that when he gets back he will be quitting his job to go travel as well. I'm not sure if he followed through with his plans as we did not exchange contact details.

I carried on up to the hostel, criss crossing up the steep side of the mountain. Every 20 minutes someone would walk passed me on their way down, always more equipped than me. Walking poles, in both hands one person even had a bundle of rope. A group of people walking donkeys down the mountain passed me, I later find out that they use donkeys to carry supplies up to the hostel.

Eventually I got so high up I started seeing snow and ice on the ground. I quickly came to a part of the trail that was covered in ice with a sheer drop below. I was confused and shocked, did they expect me to walk over this? If I slipped I would fall right off the mountain with no trees to grab onto. It had foot prints so I knew people had recently walked over it, this was why everyone else was so well equipped. I stood where the trail turned to ice for about 15 minutes hoping someone else would appear and we could cross together, but nobody came. I tried to find other routes to avoid the precarious route across the ice, but I could see no other path. The ice, like a glacier seemed to continue all the way to the top of the mountain. I thought about Elliot, the New Zealander I met who died falling off a snow capped mountain in Poland a few weeks ago.

I found a big stick to help balance myself and eventually walked across the ice gap. My shoes would slide about the ice a little with every step, I had to be deliberate in my movements. I kept the stick in my left hand facing down the mountain, just in case I lost balance I might be able to dig it into the ice enough to stop me falling catastrophically. I managed to cross the gap without any issue, taking a photo along the way. It was only another 15 minutes walk to the mountain side hostel. I checked in as thankfully they had enough beds.

The hostel itself was Spartan, no carpet and only hard uncomfortable chairs, everything felt cold. But to my surprise they sold both cooked food and beer. The woman on reception was clearly worried for me. I was asked to take my shoes off and place them on a shelf near the entrance, no shoes to be worn inside the hostel. She picked up my shoes and looked at the bottom of them, noticing how flat they were. She warned me of more snow at the top and told me I needed to be careful. I ordered some food and beer and got slightly drunk. It was only about 4:30pm.

I went outside to enjoy the views of the mountain from the hostels balcony, I realised I would not be here very long so I should make the most of it. Shortly after the English couple arrived, I was surprised I had made it to the top first after being so lazy this morning. I had assumed everyone from the sea side hostel had already arrived at the mountain hostel and had carried on up to the peak. They told me that the two well equipped mountain climbers Tommy and Ashraf were exhausted from the walking and that they had left them at the restaurant at the beginning of the trail. I was immediately concerned, I knew they would probably be cutting it close getting here before dark.

They both checked in and I went to get a shower, the bathroom was downstairs and was so very cold. The showers only had cold water and the toilets were squat ones, like I'm told some Asian countries have. I go back outside but it is getting cold, such a big difference from sea level. I put both my jumper and coat on and sit inside reading my kindle. After a few hours the guys had still not arrived, the English couple assumed they must have turned back. But I knew otherwise. They had came all the way to Greece to conquer this mountain, fully researched and prepared. They would not turn back so easily. So I spent most of the twilight hours on the balcony, expecting for them to show up any moment, but they never did.

More and more people turn up to the hostel, all fully kitted out in climbing gear. The hostel became full of people before dark. I find out that the best time to reach the peak of a mountain is early in the morning, less clouds apparently. The hostel also turns off electricity at 9pm. Before I knew it almost everyone had gone to bed, but I like staying up late. I spend a few more hours alone on the balcony, I could see the lights of Thessaloniki glowing in the distance across the sea.

I then hear some noise on the mountain some distance below the hostel. I was not sure what it was, it did not sound very close and my ears were not tuned in. It could have been a wolf like I had heard on that mountain in Romania or given the international nature of hostels it could have been all sorts of languages. I waited a few minutes and again I heard a noise, but it was so faint I could not make out what it was, but it did sound like someone shouting. My hearing is not the best so I go and find the English couple who thankfully were still awake and drag them outside into the cold to come listen.

We wait for a few minutes and again we hear something, the English guy shouts below but he gets no response. But we are now sure somebody on the mountain is trying to get our attention. I go into the hostel and drag out the receptionist, who has already closed reception for the night back out into the cold and she hears the noise as well. She calls someone on a radio and a man who works in the hostel is sent down to investigate. After about 15 minutes he reports back on the radio that he has found someone and he is helping to bring them back up. After about 30 minutes the well equipped Tommy and Ashraf crawl onto the large balcony, totally exhausted. They were both shocked to see me already here, they were even more shocked to find out I had been here since 4pm!

They had a drink and everyone quickly went to bed, the hostel was so cold each of us were given three thick blankets. The room was already dark and full of sleeping people, I could not quite get the blankets comfortably over me all night.

The next morning I awoke and the room was almost entirely empty, I headed out for breakfast and met with the two guys, they were both debating if they would carry on up the top. After yesterday they were both a little embarrassed and now intimidated by the task ahead. I'm also worried, the woman at reception had told me to be careful multiple times and I knew the snow and ice would only get worse. We decide to walk up together and just take it one step at a time. I buy some snacks at reception and we head back onto the trail.

After 2 minutes of walking we come across another ice flow, like the one I crossed yesterday but even worse. The snow and ice was fresher, I was warned that it refreezes over night so it is particularly slippery in the morning. Also it was obvious that less people have crossed here, meaning it was less compacted and had no stones or gravel visible. I took one step onto the ice to see how I felt about crossing it, but I knew it was not worth the risk. The English couple had already gone ahead but I did not know how far ahead they were. The guys were also concerned, despite having the correct shoes they also did not want to cross. We stood there for a while, eventually Ashraf just went for it. He was the most tired of the two last night and even if he did cross the ice I seriously doubted he would have the energy to get to the top and back down in time to catch his flight later that day. We watched as he crossed the ice, waved good bye and walked up the hill on the other side and then out of sight.

Me and Tommy waited here for another 15 minutes to see if we would get a surge of courage to attempt the crossing. While standing there looking out below down the mountain he told me that I saved their lives last night. This surprised me as saving lives had not even crossed my mind. It was cold the previous night but they were so close to the hostel and they could have always just walked back down to the restaurant. It did however tell me how desperate their mental situation was.

We decided we had to leave him to do his own thing, we could not stay in the hostel waiting for him to come back. I warned the receptionist from last night about how he has gone to walk up the mountain, he did not even bring any water with him. We then met a few more English people who had got up really early to try and climb the mountain but had given up near the top and already headed back down. We all grouped together and decided to walk down to the restaurant where they had hire cars waiting for them.

They were a group of nurses who were volunteering in a refugee camp in northern Greece. I remember making one of them very angry when I declared my support for Donald Trump, she told

me that she was an extreme socialist. I don't actually like Donald Trump, I just like the reaction I get from certain people. We walked down to the restaurant faster than it took me to climb up the day before, walking down is much easier. We were both offered lifts down the mountain, I took them up on the offer but Tommy said he needed to stay here and wait for his friend. I left him at the restaurant and jumped in a car to get back to town.

We were driving for a few minutes when we noticed some people in the distance hitch hiking, it was the English couple walking down. They both must have got up really early and had already attempted the summit. Apparently they too did not manage to reach the top of the mountain. We pick them up in the 2nd car and we then drive all the way to the coast where we are dropped off at the door to the hostel. We say good bye to the nurses who carry on driving.

I go up stairs to take a shower and find someone else has checked into my room. An older guy with a huge camping backpack and one of those foam camping mats tied to the outside of it. He had a large beard and some very dirty looking clothes. He asked me some questions about the mountain, he planned to climb it tomorrow. I went out to have a shower and put on some clean clothes. I did not meet anyone that day who managed to reach the top.

It was now early evening and I was getting hungry, I headed out to the other restaurant on the cul de sac. It was also completely empty, I sat down and ordered food and a beer. I ate food and went back into the hostel common room to read my kindle. Once it got dark I remember hearing loud music coming from down the beach, I decided to go investigate, maybe I would find a bar. I walked along side the beach until I got to a small dock, but I could not get to the other side of the river. I walked off the beach and found a small bridge but it was totally dark, no lighting what so ever. I knew if a car drove across the bridge I would be in danger as it also had no pedestrian walk way. I decided against crossing it and regrettably headed back to the hostel for an early night.

The next day I woke up and sat in the common room, the English couple were also leaving at the same time. We talked to the reception about the train timetable and the owner of the hostel offered to drive us to the station. The owners were angry at the little Jack Russell dog, he had apparently wandered off all day yesterday and only came back for food. I told them my cousin had a female Jack Russell dog who would also run off and explore my village on it's own. As a child I was always finding his dog in fields or woods, often miles away from it's house.

After a while we jumped into the owners car and reached the train station, I was headed to Athens, they were going to a place called Meteora but we would both catch the same train. We stood on the platform together and noted how children were allowed to play on the train tracks even in the station. Eventually we boarded. An hour later we reached the city of Larissa where I had to change trains, I said goodbye to the couple and exited the train.

Athens - 21/05/2017 - 24/05/2017

I had 4 hours to spend in Larissa before I could catch my connecting train to Athens. So I got off the train but first I headed to the toilets, I found them on the far side of the platform. I walked in and found the cubicles had no doors or toilet paper, but nobody was around so I used it anyway. I'd got so used to public toilets that I did not care any more and I always carried huge amounts of toilet paper with me. I then headed into the station, some old Greek men sitting on a bench greeted me. One man put his hand out wanting to shake hands and they asked where I was from, I replied with England. I guess they were happy Larissa was getting some tourists, I didn't tell them about my connecting train.

I walked around the city for a bit, I knew I could find some interesting ruins here. I walked up to the amphitheatre and then a little further around the ruins of the old city. I found a large open, abandoned building full of graffiti, I didn't know what its purpose was. I then headed out to find a restaurant for lunch, I needed to find one with WiFi because I wanted to book a hostel for the night in Athens. I walked around for a bit until I found a restaurant with some people hanging outside. I asked them if it had WiFi and it did, so I sat down and was given a menu. But it was only in Greek, and the people in the restaurant did not speak English. They asked some children over to my table to help translate, I guess they teach English in schools. I ordered a toasted sandwich, chips and a smoothie and then booked my hostel for the night. I then headed back to the train station, kinda wishing I had the time to explore the city for a few more days.

I boarded my train and headed to Athens, by the time I arrived at Athens railway station it was completely dark. I looked around and briefly thought about trying to navigate the Metro but I decided against it, I set off into the night with the streets busy with tourists and travellers. I had to navigate my way to a hostel called Athens Backpackers, I could see it was the other side of the Acropolis and that it would require detours to skirt around it. I remember it taking me a really long time, over an hour to walk there and it was difficult to find. Lot of small disorganised streets with very busy roads.

When I found the street the hostel was located in it was not obvious where I should go. I walked into a nearby bar and they told me to go next door, but I could not see anything to indicate it was a hostel. I walked in through a door and found a tiny reception, they informed me I was in fact in the wrong building. The hostel had advertised itself purposely incorrectly, it was more like two hostels, one with the nice roof side balcony and a 2nd with nothing. I was supposed to be in the 2nd one. Annoyed that I would now have to navigate to a 2nd hostel I set out once again, hopefully it would not take me long.

I arrived at the 2nd hostel, checked in and went up stairs to my room. This hostel had no common area or kitchen. In my room I met with a tall black American guy named Ethan, he was backpacking around Europe for a month while he was waiting to graduate from university. We spoke for a while as I unpacked and then headed down stairs to a bar nearby. I remember being annoyed at paying 6 Euros for a pint, I had spent the last month in eastern Europe using weaker currencies, similar bars in Prague for example were charging around a single Euro. After speaking for a while I went to bed.

My first day in Athens was spent museum hopping, and the first stop was the Acropolis. It was 10am by the time I arrived and it was already busy and really hot. I still had my student ID from university which allowed me to get free entrance into all museums in Greece, as well as 25% off train travel. The queue to enter was not that long, I remember waiting about 15 minutes to get in. Once I did I started the walk up to the top, swinging my still cool but at this point very battered and dented aluminium water bottle around. Not far from the entrance a woman in front of me collapses, it looked like heat stroke. Her friends or family lay her down and held her head up, her eyes were closed, as if she was trying her hardest to stay conscious. They had no water so I gave my water bottle to one of the people with her, they poured some on her head to try and cool her down and handed me back the rest. I couldn't do any more so I carried on up to the top.

My next stop was the Acropolis Museum, it was nearby and again I had free entry. It was a really good museum, very well funded and more similar to the ones I found in western Europe. Finally I headed to the National Archaeological Museum of Athens, I knew they had the Antikythera mechanism in their collection. I then headed back down to the Panathenaic Stadium, Temple of Olympian Zeus and then back to the hostel. A really busy day but where else in the world can you see so much history?

Back at the hostel I met up with Ethan the American guy again and I told him of my plans to get Indian food. I hadn't had any since I left home months ago and I found what looked to be a good restaurant nearby. It was a place called Namaste Indian Restaurant. He told me that he had only tried Indian food once or twice before so he did not know what to expect. I invited him along. The restaurant only had a few people inside, but it had a lot of good online reviews, it also looked really clean. I told him we should order Keema naan and Pilau rice and that we can share them. We both picked curries and drinks. The food came in those large stainless steel bowls you often see at Indian restaurants. The food itself was okay, not quite as good as back home but Ethan enjoyed it. We headed to the other hostel building to get drinks on the roof top bar.

Here the views of the Acropolis were amazing, it was dark outside and you could see as it was illuminated from the flood lights. We met a few people and I commented on how you could probably sneak into the Acropolis at night, put up a tent and spend the night up there. I started thinking more and more about the limitations of hostels and hotels. I headed back to our hostel building, the roof top bar was very small and I had planned for a long day tomorrow.

The next day I woke up early and headed out, I planned to explore Mount Hymettus, the mountain that overlooks the city of Athens. Without any maps or plans I started walking south east towards the mountain range in the distance. I kept walking until I found some wooded area, lots of tall thin trees and dusty footpaths. I didn't see many people here. I carried on walking, trying to pick the right path to the top of the mountain, always unsure where I was walking towards. Every path I took seemed to lead me away from the top of the mountain. Eventually I said screw this and got off the trail to start walking up on my own. It didn't seem that steep and I could navigate over the large boulders. However, I started to see a few tortoises and then I realised the possibility of snakes. After climbing up quite high on my own I found a road and headed back down. At this point I was also running out of water. On my way down I found an abandoned observation post which I climbed up into. The whole mountain had amazing views of the city and I didn't meet anyone else all day. I headed back to the hostel and had a quiet night.

The next day I woke up and headed to a bus station called KTEL Bus Station Terminal B, I would be travelling to a place called Delphi. The bus station was quite a long walk outside the city but the weather was a little cooler than the previous day. It took me a while to navigate myself around Athens but I found the station, purchased my ticket and waited for my bus. It was not long before it arrived, I put my backpack in the hold under the bus, boarded and found my designated seat.

Delphi - 24/05/2017 - 26/05/2017

The Greeks believed that Delphi was the centre of the world, they even had a large Pineapple shaped stone that they used to mark it. Delphi was apparently the place the titan Prometheus moulded the original Greeks out of clay and gave life to them. People from all around the ancient world would come to the oracle at Delphi to ask questions to the Olympic god Apollo, who would always respond with a truthful but dangerously vague answer. I felt that it was an appropriate place to end my travels in Greece. I did want to go further south into the Peloponnese but when I arrived it didn't feel right. I had spent over two months travelling in a direction away from home by bus and train, I had less than one month to get back.

I waited on the bus to Delphi, I took out my kindle and started reading like usual. The bus began to fill up and everyone had designated seating. I was hoping that nobody would sit next to me, having two seats to yourself allows you to move and lounge across the two seats, I also believe it is helpful when trying to avoid health problems on longer journeys. Sitting next to someone else, especially a stranger, restricts your movements so you become like a statue for the whole bus ride.

I notice a woman get on board, quite short, young looking but I knew she looked to be around my age. She started walking towards me checking the seat numbers as she went. Eventually she got to my row of seats, she would be sitting next to me. I moved over and introduced myself, she was called Alise and was from Amsterdam. Like me Alise was also backpacking solo around Europe for three months. She had a very light skin tone, not quite as light as mine and her face was all freckled from the hot Greek sun. We were both going to be spending three days in Delphi. The bus departed Athens and we talked off and on about our travels around Europe, she was just starting her trip but she had travelled quite a lot around Asia when she was younger.

She pulled out a guide book for Greece, a thick heavy book that contained hotel information, tourist sights and maps. She had everything for the next three months planned out. I described my style of travelling and how I pick places to travel based simply on Google maps. How often I just turn up to a city with no where to sleep. She told me I would miss so much that way, how would I know where to go or what to do? But I always end up meeting other people and let them do the planning for me. I was also shocked to find she had a long term boyfriend waiting for her back home in Amsterdam. It is rare to meet backpackers who can juggle long term travel and relationships, not that I would personally know. I remember that woman in Krakow crying because she got drunk and had yet again cheated on her boyfriend who was back in Australia.

After a few hours of talking an older English woman on the seats in front of us also introduced herself as Lisa. She had been listening into our conversation and that she was travelling alone and like us would be spending three days in Delphi. We all decided to meet up to get food and drinks later that night. The bus zig zagged up a hill side, the area wasn't busy or populated. We arrived in a small village with lots of small guest houses and tourist shops. I noticed the large number of bus tours, most people only come here for a day. I asked the two women about accommodation because like normal I had yet to book a room anywhere. I knew that it was a weekday so I was sure I would find a bed somewhere. Lisa invited me to try and find a room at the guest house she had booked, it

was also the closest to the bus stop we were dropped off at. Lisa and Alise exchange contact details and me and Lisa say goodbye to Alise who continues walking down the street.

We walk into the guest house and thankfully they have spare rooms. I remember it also being quite cheap, as cheap as many hostels in western Europe, I book two nights. I had plans to spend the first day exploring Delphi and the Archaeological Museum, the 2nd day I wanted to walk up the hills over looking Delphi and explore the countryside. I take a shower and relax for an hour, I was excited my small room had a balcony where I could dry my clothes. I then head out to Delphi itself. I first explore the outside ruins, the temples and Stadium. The site was very confusing, how and why did the Greeks built so many different buildings on such a small site. I also did not understand where the people actually lived, maybe it had a small population and was mostly ceremonial I thought, like the Vatican city. I then headed into the museum building.

After a few hours in the museum it started to get dark, I go back to my guest house and get ready to meet Lisa and Alise from the bus. We find a cafe that has telescopes overlooking the sea, it was expensive but I found that it served the best tasting coffee I had in a very long time. We order food and beer and sit on the balcony talking about our travels. I remember the two women having a conversation on exploring sexuality and how the younger generations experiment more but I did not say anything. I make plans with Alise to meet up tomorrow morning to climb up the hills over looking Delphi, she wanted to see if we could find a cave from her guide book. We all head back to our guest houses quite early. The area despite being busy during the day was like a ghost town at night.

The next day I woke up early and met up with Alise in the same cafe we had met last night. She was prepared for a long walk, she was wearing her 2nd pair of boots she packed just for hiking; they looked heavy and I would have hated carrying them around. Everything she owned looked new and expensive and everything I owned was cheap, even my large backpack only cost £18 from eBay. She had proper hiking clothes and I had a pair of old tracksuit bottoms from Primark and a gym t-shirt. We started walking into the modern area of Delphi, the further we went away from the Museum and Archaeological site for more residential it became. We struggled to find the beginning of the trail that led up the top of the hill but eventually after some backtracking we found it.

We started walking up the little trail making small talk along the way. It was still morning and it was getting hotter every hour. Delphi was already situated quite high up with a surprisingly steep drop to sea level. The higher we walked it created a view that reminded me of Parallax scrolling from Sega Mega Drive games. The backdrop was the sea, followed by the flat plains, the buildings of Delphi and finally the hills below us. We eventually came across an outdoor seating area that had great views and we sat inside for a while. We took some photos and I remember dropping my phone, putting a large dent in a corner of the plastic case, but it still worked fine.

We carried on walking until, I cant remember why but we decided to take a short detour off the trail. We walked up onto a small empty plateau with even greater views. The area had no tracks or obvious routes back down but I commented on what a great place it was to go camping. We eventually backtracked down and carried on following the trail. We reached some farm buildings and could even see a small village in the distance. I wanted to know what was over every hill, like I was playing my own Elder Scrolls game, always exploring. Eventually Alise wanted to head back

down, she still had to visit the Delphi museum and it was already early afternoon. We took some more photos and followed the trail back down to Delphi.

Going back down was a lot faster than going up, but it was hotter now. I noticed strange sounds coming from bushes on the trail, then I watched as a snake quickly ran off the trail in front of me and into another bush. We must have been surrounded by snakes the whole time and the mid day heat had just started to warm them up. We got back down to the buildings and split ways, we agreed to meet up again later that night for food and drinks.

I went back to my guest house and relaxed for a few hours and then headed back to the Cafe. I set up my laptop and ordered some coffee, eventually Lisa turned up and Alise the Dutch woman an hour later. We talked about our day on the balcony as it became dark. Me and Alise talked about our walk up the hills and how we did not see another person all day. Lisa made a comment asking if we took off all of our clothes together on the hill, suggesting we may have done more than just walk that day. Not a comment me or the Alise was prepared for. It didn't occur to me as an option, especially knowing she was in a long term relationship. We head back to our guest houses one last time, we will all go our separate ways in the morning.

The next day we all briefly meet up but the English woman Lisa says good bye and leaves on her bus early in the morning. Me and Alise set up in a nearby restaurant called Delphikón to have breakfast. I place my large backpack on the floor, the restaurant was almost empty anyway. We both still have a few hours to catch our different buses, with mine departing first to Patras.

She begins to tell me a story about her boyfriend not wanting to have children. She had been in a relationship with him for almost 10 years and she kept thinking he might change his mind one day. But she felt that she was getting older and maybe he would never change his mind, maybe she would have to leave him in order to start a family. I had actually seen a similar situation before, when a woman waits until she is over 30 before she even thinks about having a child, only to find out she now needs IVF. I tell her that if she wants a family she should do it now, her boyfriend can have a family when he is 60 years old if he wants to. I also find it funny that someone is asking me for such deep relationship advice, given how I have yet to even hold a woman's hand.

She then asks: "Are you going to have children?"

What could I say? Maybe in another life I would have had children and a family. But I doubt I would ever have that chance.

I reply "I don't think I will have the opportunity to have children."

Alise reacted quickly, as if she was both confused and sad at the same time. Maybe she thought that all men have this opportunity and that it was only women who have difficult choices to make. I could not explain my situation any more, if I talked about my lack of relationships it would have created a negative atmosphere. Nor could she continue questioning me for the same reason. We just sat in silence for a few seconds and moved the conversation on.

Eventually it came time for me to catch my bus. I picked up my heavy backpack and Alise walked me to the bus stop. Just as my bus arrived she invited me to stay with her for another day in Delphi. I knew what she wanted. But she did not understand my situation, if she did I doubt she would not be suggesting that I stay with her. I doubt she would have even made small talk to me on the bus 2

days earlier in Athens. I tell her I can't, say good bye and get on board my bus. I depart for Patras without even having her contact details.

Patras to Bari - 26/05/2017 - 27/05/2017

I started my trip with the aim of getting down to Greece and taking a ferry over to Italy. I had done no research into this ferry, I only have a faint memory of seeing it on TV, yet my entire trip relied on being able to catch one. I left Delphi by bus, it was bittersweet. I headed to Patras as I had heard this is where the ferry departs. The bus was delayed by a few hours and I didn't get to Patras until mid afternoon.

A few weeks before I had told the Australian guy Chris I met in Ghent and Amsterdam about the ferry, he did not know how to get from Italy to Greece. He apparently ended up taking the same route as me but in the opposite direction, I remember he wasn't impressed by the conditions. I was now leaving Greece but I wished I had spent more time here.

I got off the bus, not knowing where the docks were exactly. I walked along the coast for over an hour, just heading towards the big ships. I was getting worried as the day was getting late, I had not booked a ferry, nor did I even know if a ferry would be available. I knew the longer it took me to get to the docks the less chance I would have at catching one. On the way I stopped off at a cafe to get some cola and use the bathroom. The weather was hot and I was walking really fast.

As I was approaching the big ships I remember a man jogging, he stopped, out of breath. For some reason all this fast walking and being worried about the ferry made me also run. So with my big heavy backpack I started running along side him, trying to encourage him to carry on, I never spoke to him but the docks were right next to the park he was in. He carried on running a different route.

I arrived at the docks, and a woman on the "Kiosk" said:

"Ahh, you must be for the ferry to Bari".

I did not know where Bari was, so I asked

"Is that in Italy?"

"Yes!" she replied.

I purchased a ticket for Bari, and then asked the woman to point out Bari on a map of Italy, I had no idea if it was in the north or the south Italy. All the people in the Kiosk seemed surprised I was just taking the ferry completely unplanned, they told me I had 15 minutes before the ferry departs so I quickly started walking towards the ship. I boarded the ship, not knowing how or where I would sleep for the next 15 hours. But I was really excited, this ferry had been the focus of my mind for the last 2.5 months. It had been the whole reason why I took this route.

I went into the main seating area, not knowing where I should try and sleep. The ferry doesn't provide accommodation, only regular seating despite it being an over night ferry. I met a Greek woman on the ferry, she was going to Italy but I can't remember why. We talked for a bit and then both went outside on the deck to watch the ferry depart. I wanted to watch as Greece disappeared beyond my view, signalling the end of the penultimate stage in my trip.

After the port disappeared from view we went back inside, I was not sure what to do so I explored the ferry. It had a few seating options and also a restaurant, I hoped it served breakfast as I had almost no food on me. I spent my time reading my kindle and speaking to the Greek woman, waiting for it to get late so I could try and get sleep. The ferry did not reach Bari until 9am, so I had plenty of time.

I decided to sleep on the row of chairs behind the Greek woman, she managed to get to sleep really fast. I did not sleep one bit. I eventually gave up trying to sleep on the chairs and tried the floor, a much better option as the arm rests kept digging into me. But I still did not sleep. I got up and went to get breakfast, I knew it might be a long day ahead of me. The restaurant was more of a cafeteria, where you slide your tray and tell someone behind the counter what you want. I also got some coffee.

Once the ferry docked it was chaos, everyone trying to rush out of the ship. I lost contact with the Greek woman, I'm not sure if she tried to wait for me or went off ahead of me. Either way I didn't see her again. Once off I met an older man who said he was writing a book, we spent 15 minutes trying to decide how to get to the city centre of Bari. The queue for the bus looked long, and I did not fancy being stuck sitting down on a hot crowded bus I decided to stretch my legs. So I left him at the bus stop and went walking into the centre on my own.

I walked out of the docks and into what I can only describe as an "Old Town". It was disorganised, not like the area around the train station I would see later. I walked passed some kids playing football, the ball ran towards me and I managed to flick it up behind my back and kicked it to the boy in goal. Still pretty agile even carrying all my stuff.

I arrived in Bari not knowing where I would sleep, my first stop was the nearest McDonald's to hook onto the WiFi and plan my next move. I found a McDonald's but the WiFi required me to have an Italian phone number, I had not seen this at any other McDonald's before. I needed to find another way to get WiFi, I walked around until I found a small coffee shop and ordered a coffee.

I had difficulty finding any accommodation in Bari and I wanted to make my way north anyway. I booked a bus to Naples instead. Like Patras and Larissa I also wished I had more time to explore Bari. I walked to the bus station in Bari, just outside of the Central Train Station and after a while got on my bus.

Naples - 27/05/2017 - 28/05/2017

By the time I arrived in Naples it was getting dark, the sky was dark orange as the sun set. I headed towards my hostel called Naples Pizza Hostel, totally shattered from the lack of sleep and travel. The area around the hostel had lots of tiny roads with old unplanned high rise buildings. Some of the roads were too small even for a single car to pass through, everyone whizzed around on mopeds, even what looked to be children riding them. A very disorganised and busy city, nothing like my village back in England.

I found my hostel, booked in and had a shower. At this point all of my clothes were dirty as I did not see an opportunity to wash anything on the ferry. I put all of my clothes, including my rather smelly jeans in the shower with me. I then hung everything out on the rails around my bunk bed, getting the floor wet in the process.

I had no plans to explore the city at night so I grabbed my laptop and sat in the common room. Within a few minutes I had started talking to an English woman and a Pakistani woman who was around my age called Fariha. I told them about my journey around Europe and how I had caught a ferry to Italy unplanned. They said that they were jealous of men, they did not believe women could travel so freely. But I had met many women who had travelled in the same way as myself so I tried to convince them otherwise, but they didn't believe me. We spoke for a bit longer when they invited me out to get Pizza, Naples is apparently famous for Pizza, but as it would turn out not my favourite Pineapple pizza. They explained they invited me out because they needed a man to keep them safe in the city at night.

We headed out, it was now totally dark outside being about 9pm. I had spent almost no time in Naples so I didn't know the area, I followed the two women out and they wanted to stop at a bar. We got some drinks, the Pakistani woman Fariha did not drink alcohol so she had a soft drink. We spoke for a while and then decided to head out further to get Pizza. We found a street full of small busy restaurants, people sitting outside at night on little white plastic chairs and tables. Mopeds were constantly humming in the background, an almost unbearable amount of noise. We walked down the street and settled on what looked to be a busy and clean restaurant selling Pizza. The menu however only had "traditional" pizzas, almost all containing ham. Fine for me and the English woman so we ordered, but Fariha could not eat ham, and only halal meat. Ramadan had just started and she had not ate anything all day so she decided to head to a Kebab shop the other side of the street to get some Halal food.

She came back quite quickly and sat down outside the Pizza shop, apparently they had given her free food because she was following Ramadan. I found it interesting that a woman with such conservative religious beliefs was not wearing any kind of head scarf and also travelling alone around Europe living in shared hostels of all things. I have previously known a woman from Saudi Arabia who told me it was even illegal for her to travel alone, I imagined it was similar culture in Pakistan.

I could tell just from our conversation that she was deeply unhappy with her life. The way she talked and answered questions, I knew that her life style was likely causing friction with her

conservative views. I found that a person can have either liberal or conservative religious views and these are both expressed inwardly on themselves and outwardly on society. Some people are liberal both inwardly and outwardly, others conservative both inwardly and outwardly. But she was conservative inwardly and yet liberal outwardly, I had never met anyone who shared this. I knew it must have been quietly destructive, to be so forgiving to the world around her while holding herself to such a high standard, constantly punishing herself.

We ate our food and headed back to the hostel. I found out that Fariha was following the same route as me up to northern Italy so we exchanged contact details and I offered to meet up with her a few days later in Rome. I was only in Naples for 1 night, I had visited the city when I was a child and had no interest to spend any longer here. I went to bed.

I woke up as late in the morning as I could, most of my clothes had already dried out because it was so hot in the hostel room. I checked out and left the hostel, only just seeing Naples in the sun light for the first time. I walked back to the bus stop I had arrived at last night, it was called Metropark Centrale. The city and bus station were completely unrecognisable to me in the day light. I stood around the station for a while eating chocolate then got on my bus and headed to Rome.

Rome - 28/05/2017 - 31/05/2017

I arrived in Rome at the Rome Tiburtina Bus station, I had a short walk to my hostel located near the central train station. I checked in for 3 nights, when I started the trip I would have booked 5 but I was getting really bored backpacking. Every city I did the same things, met the same people and had the same conversations. I thought 3 nights would be just enough, I would have felt guilty spending anything less in such an important city.

I messaged Fariha from last night to see if she had a safe trip. It turned out she had booked into a different hostel but that it was actually in the same building as mine, just on a different floor. The bad news was my hayfever returned, I had no problems the day before in Bari or Naples but maybe Rome has different types of grass pollen? Rome was hot, I remember it being over 30C for the three days, even hotter than Greece. I checked into my hostel and for a change it was very spacious, the room itself even had a large table and chairs in the middle, many hostels would have just thrown in another 2 bunk beds.

I remember my backpack at this point smelling really bad. I discussed the smell with a few people sharing the room with me, they made a game trying to guess what it would be. I emptied it on the floor of my hostel room and I had to smell everything one by one. Eventually I found the culprit, a single sock, I must have forgot to wash it from the ferry. I went into the shared bathroom, filled a sink full of water and placed my sock to soak into the sink. I then left the hostel knowing nobody would want to touch a smelly sock.

My first thought was to walk straight to the Colosseum, I had been to Rome before as a child but had only drove passed the Colosseum on a coach. I walked down and around the Colosseum, it was still busy but I didn't want to visit it so late in the day, I decided I would come back first thing in the morning to avoid the queues. The area around the Colosseum is like entering a tourists nightmare, all these impressive and old buildings with hundreds of people trying scams. Men trying to grab my hands to put things on me, people starting seemingly innocent conversations and then asking me to buy stuff, or inviting me to follow them. I already did not like Rome.

I walked around the area for a short while and then headed back to the hostel to get food. I went to explore the area around the Central train station, I knew it had lots of small restaurants and a station that big will have some big chain fast food restaurants. However I found that the train station was even worse than the Colosseum, it was now dark outside and I felt completely unsafe. The area had a different vibe and I did not see many tourists. I found a small Indian restaurant/ cafeteria called Flavours of India Roma. It was small and the food was cheap but it looked really busy and clean. To my surprise the food was great and the staff were very friendly, I was not expecting to find such a nice place around here. I headed back to the hostel, I was not socialising with as many people now and I actually tried to avoid many conversations.

The next day I headed back to the Colosseum and purchased a ticket, I got up early to avoid long queues but not early enough to avoid all the queues. I then walked up to the Roman Forum and then to the Sacratio delle bandiere, I purchased some food and tried to eat it on the white stairs but a

guard moved me along. I then just sat on the busy pavement and ate my food there. I had spent 3 months homeless, I had now started to behave so.

I walked down to the river Tiber and along it until I reached a bridge, then I walked around the Vatican square. I intended on going in but the queues at mid day were too much for me so I headed to the Castel Sant'Angelo and crossed a bridge back over the river. I walked passed the Pantheon, it rekindled a memory of me visiting it as a child. Finally I walked back to the hostel and had agreed to meet up with Fariha later to get some more Indian food.

A few hours went by in the hostel, I took a shower and washed some clothes. We agreed to meet up near the train station, I believe she had been on a day tour somewhere and had just got back. She was still following Ramadan so had not eaten anything all day and wanted to get a biryani, I told her about the one I found yesterday and how it seemed to be very authentic. But she had already found another Indian restaurant near the train station that she wanted to go to. We walked there together, it was an Indian restaurant that also sold Pizza! What kind of Indian restaurant has several pages of Pizza on their menu? We ordered, the food was okay.

We talked about life more, about how she wanted a family and children but could not find anyone to marry her. She was a few years older than me and had given up on the idea of relationships. Like me she seemed to have dedicated her life to work. My original thoughts about her being deeply sad were confirmed. She burst out and unsolicited, told me that she had not had sex, not a question I would have asked or even wanted to discuss, but she brought it up. I tried to provoke her into rethinking her plans for the future, that having children should not be something to give up on.

She had the problem that in order to have children she needed to be married and that she can only marry a Muslim man. But she explained most Muslim men do not want to marry a woman so independent as herself. So she was alone. I did not see why she had to restrict herself to only Muslim men, possibly sacrificing her own future happiness. I found deep sadness in her and she reminded me of an even more extreme version of my life. We walked back to our hostel building and agreed to meet up once more in Venice a few days later. I went to bed early.

My last day in Rome was disorganised, I was bored of backpacking and found it hard to get excited about more museums. I left the hostel and had a walk around but it was hot so by mid day I headed back to the hostel. I got changed and put on my Hawaiian t-shirt and Hawaiian shorts, combined with my floppy hat I looked very strange. I then headed into the train station to get lunch, I noticed people looking at me as they walked passed. Then an older Italian woman laughed at me and asked where I was from, I replied "England" and she stated that "Only an English man can dress so ridiculously!".

I went back to the hostel and read my kindle until it got late. The next day I would be going to Venice.

Venice - 31/05/2017 - 03/06/2017

I woke up, checked out of the hostel and I headed back to the Tiburtina Bus station. My hayfever had almost completely gone after 3 days in Rome, I have no idea why as the weather was still very hot. I boarded the bus and it stopped off at Florence just before it had reached Venice. I also spent a day in Florence as a child and I remember it being a really clean city. I arrived in Venice at the Mestre station, I was disorganised and did not know where I was. I walked to a nearby McDonald's to get food and then headed to the place I was staying. Venice itself was fully booked so I was staying at a camp site called Jolly Camping, it had a swimming pool and looked okay but it was quite a walk from anywhere interesting.

When I eventually arrived it was an exciting place, I immediately met a Sikh couple from England who were touring Europe on motorbikes together. I spoke for a while before checking in. I was sleeping in a large permanent tent with 3 other beds. The tent was quite good, more like a building than a tent. But it sucked in heat like crazy, I could not spend time in there during the day. I met an American guy who was on the bed next to me, he was about to graduate from university in the USA and was just finishing up his last pieces of work while travelling.

The camp site had a really nice bar and everything was so lively, I went into the bar with my laptop to catch up on the news. I had agreed to meet the Italian woman Valentina I had met 2 months ago in Amsterdam, we had kept in contact this whole time online and she wanted to show me around Venice. The problem was she wanted to meet tonight, it was already late and I was very tired from travelling. The camp site runs a bus every 30 minutes or so but they stop around 10pm and it was already so late that if I took a bus now I would have no way of getting back. I would have to find a way to catch public transport and walk the rest of the way.

So I purchased a ticket and boarded the bus, I was apprehensive going into a city I had not visited before, on my own and with no way back. The bus was almost empty, only two other people were catching the bus this late and it was only illuminated by little lights on the floor. I arrived in Venice having done no research on the city and it turned out Venice has almost no cars so the bus stopped on the outskirts of the island. The area looked almost industrial, I guess it was the main port for shipping.

I walked into Venice, I had the idea that it was a small island, but it just kept going. Always another bridge to cross and every street looked the same as the next. I was told to meet her at the Rialto Bridge, I didn't know it at the time but it's a very famous land mark, shows how little research I did while travelling. It was already late by the time I arrived, but the city was still busy with tourists. I walked over the bridge and waited in the square nearby. I found free WiFi and sent her a photo of the square I was standing in, she lived on a side street nearby. I could not imagine living in such a busy international place, my house back home overlooks fields, even the cities nearby never have tourists.

I waited hoping she would get the photo, 5 minutes later I got a message saying she knew where I was and would be out in 5 minutes. I waited near a statue in the square, not sure what I would do

when she appeared. We had spoke so much online that I felt it might be strange meeting her again. She knew everything about me, all my travel stories, she knew I had never kissed anyone.

After 5 or 10 minutes she appeared across the square near the statue, she started looking around for me but I had situated myself off to the side to avoid the crowds. I did my best to sneak up on her but it did not work, she spotted me before I got close enough. We hugged and started talking, thankfully no awkward silences or conversation. After all this time we still spoke to each other like we did in Amsterdam or online. She had plans to show me around all the main sights in Venice, I did no research so I had no idea what the main sights even were. Another time where I would be blindly following someone at night in a city I did not know, even after studying the city on google maps I can't fully retrace my steps that night.

We spent the night walking around the streets of Venice. Early in the night we headed to a place near the Basilica di Santa Maria della Salute, right on the end of the peninsular, by the time we arrived nobody else was here. I was totally disoriented by the small streets and lack of roads, Venice is actually known to be hard to navigate as a way of defending against invaders and it worked on me. We sat along at the end of the grand canal and she told me it was her favourite place in the city.

We then headed back into the city, to a place called Campo Santa Margherita and eventually went to what looked to be a small bar and got drinks. She told me to get something called a Spritz and then we sat down on a bench together. It was now around 1am but people were still about drinking and walking around, they did not look like tourists, locals and students I thought. We drank the Spritz and then we got some wine, the whole time we were talking to each other. Despite it being so late it was still hot outside and I did not feel cold in my shirt.

We were sitting close to each other with our legs and bodies touching. I looked at her and said I had never kissed anyone before and paused. She replied "I know". A few seconds later I leaned in, placed my hand on her neck and kissed her. Drunk courage maybe. After a short while I pulled away and leaned back to the bench. Just kissing her had made me so nervous I was shaking, she could see it and laughed at me. Just then she quickly leaned into me, placed her hand on the back of my head. I watched for a brief second as her eyes closed and she kissed me. It felt strange being so physically close to another person. Curiously, I realised that I had never actually touched another persons head before, it was much more bulky than I had imagined.

We sat on the bench a while longer, I was still somewhat in shock. She commented that if I was like this for just a kiss, imagine what I would be like when I have sex for the first time. We walked around Venice for a few more hours and we then walked back to the square near the Rialto bridge we had originally met. We hugged and said good bye. It was now about 3am and I had to somehow navigate my way back to the campsite. I chose a route that took me north and around the canal, walking passed a McDonald's. I did not want to cross the Rialto bridge and get lost again in the little side streets.

After about an hour I found my way back to the bus station, it was almost empty and I did not know exactly what bus I needed to catch. I waited for about 20 minutes before the bus arrived and boarded, the driver did not want to accept any money from me. The bus headed back across the bridge to the mainland and dropped me off somewhere near the Venezia-Mestre train station. By this point my phone battery had died and I was navigating by compass only. I knew my hostel lay to

the south west of the train station and started walking. It was about 5am at this point and the sun was rising fast, normally when I am lost I ask for directions alot but the streets were empty and the shops were all closed.

I eventually made it back to the campsite around 6am I quietly walked into my tent and accidentally woke up the American who was sleeping on the bed. He laughed at me know I must have had some crazy night, I climbed onto my bed and went to sleep.

The next day I woke up and decided to go for a swim in the pool, but that got boring quickly. I then went into the bar with my laptop, ordered food and watched YouTube videos for a few hours. The American guy came in to the bar with his laptop, he was still trying to finish off some university work. We spoke for a while about careers when he graduates. This was the last time we spoke and I never got his contact details. I also messaged Fariha, she was staying in some expensive hotel on the Island itself. I realised I would not have the time to meet her once more. I wanted to help her, but I knew I could not do anything to improve her situation.

Valentina wanted to meet up again later tonight and I had not seen Venice in the day light. So I caught the bus onto the island once more, at around 2pm in the afternoon. I spent that afternoon walking around and exploring on my own. I was still bored of backpacking, despite being in Venice I had no real interest to go or see anywhere. I met up again with Valentina and she wanted to get Pizza, I thought sure, I probably should while I'm in Italy. But I don't really like Pizza, I don't like messy foods in general and Pizza is a very heavy food. She went to a pizza place she liked and we got two Pizza boxes, she handed me one and we went to sit on a bench. We ate the Pizza together, I could not finish mine and she actually seemed disappointed in me. Maybe even offended. She managed to eat hers, a whole box of very cheesy Pizza to herself.

We did the same kind of stuff as the night before and walked around the city a little aimlessly. We went to a place called the Bridge of Sighs and walked down what looked to be a dock for small boats. It was getting late again so we walked back to the centre and on the way a large group of people appeared in front of us, they were loudly chanting Hare Krishna creating a relaxing atmosphere on the small crowded Venetian streets. We followed them for some time before they went off in a different direction the we decided to get a type of ice cream called gelato. We sat down to eat it along side a small canal. Some shops were still open this late but the streets were very quiet. I remember feeling very lonely and lost, almost depressed by Venice.

We were sitting very close, our legs touching each other. After a while I gained enough confidence to kiss her again, as I leaned in she pulled back slightly, we kissed but I could tell she either did not want me to or that she was just not expecting it. But it was already too late. I know I should not have kissed her but how could I have known? I never thought that I would be capable of doing something so "creepy". I could now see why relationships and sex could be so problematic, consent is not always obvious, at least for me on that night. We headed back to the square near the Rialto bridge for the last time and said goodbye. We separated ways early enough for me to catch the last bus back to the campsite. I went to bed confused and ashamed at myself.

I woke up the next day and messaged her, she seemed happy and unaffected by what had happened last night. She even told me a few weeks later that she thought we should have drank more wine and that maybe more would have happened. Her response just brought up even more questions about

what is consent, I don't think I will ever fully understand it. It is certainly not the black and white concept that I thought it was just a few days before this.

I left the campsite in Venice and walked back to the bus station in Mestre, my bus was not until mid afternoon. I had fell out of love with travelling and did not feel I would lose out by getting to Milan a few hours later. I first found a barbers nearby and went to get my hair cut again, it had grown back since I had it cut a few months ago. The barbers were Chinese, they did not speak English and I did not speak Chinese or Italian. But just like the Iraqi barbers back in Ghent it was easy to make the hand gestures to have it all cut short. I then headed into the train station and set up in the small McDonald's inside. I got bored of sitting in McDonald's and I had been sitting there so long I was getting looks, I headed outside and ended up sitting on the floor at the bus station. I used my coat as a kind of picnic blanket and read my kindle. Eventually the bus turned up, being so late in the afternoon I knew I would be dark when I arrived in Milan.

Milan - 03/06/2017 - 05/06/2017

I picked Milan as the last city I wanted to visit in Italy because I was told it was completely different from the other major cities. Being more influenced by French and German cultures and it is also one of the richest cities in Europe. By the time I arrived in Lampugnano station it was dark, I had to make my way across the city to a hostel called Koala Hostel. Once I arrived they told me that they did not accept credit card, but this was not advertised anywhere before I made the booking so I was seriously annoyed. It was dark outside and all I wanted to do was have a shower. Now I had to back track for about 10 minutes to find an ATM machine to withdraw some Euros, I expected this in Eastern Europe or rural hostels but not in the centre of Milan.

Once checked in I didn't really like the hostel, I found it to be one of the worst on my trip. I remember spending the evening sitting on a sofa in the corridor because the common room was too loud. The reception had annoyed me so much by not accepting credit cards that I did not want to be around other people.

The next day I had the whole of Milan to explore, I had only booked 2 nights which gave me one full day to explore the city. I planned to spend it aimlessly walking around. I headed out and actually walked passed a cigar shop and purchased some on a whim. Then I headed down to the centre, the only tourist site that I wanted to see was the Milan Cathedral. But just like in Rome the whole area was swarming with people trying to run scams. I headed to one of the high streets and walked around looking at restaurant menus, they were all on the high end for prices but I knew Milan was expensive. I picked one that was really busy and ordered some fancy chicken dish and beer. I had become very used to eating on my own, even in formal restaurants. Three months ago in Paris I barely had the confidence to go to a Kebab shop on my own. After lunch I was so bored I headed back to the hostel to do some reading in the common room.

After reading for most of late afternoon and early evening I went out to a Chinese restaurant that I had found nearby. It was so busy inside a queue had formed so I decided to order take out instead. I ordered my food and waited near the entrance. A Chinese family were also waiting outside and one of their children wanted to practice English with me as we waited. The food came after about 20 minutes and I went to a sheltered side street, sat on the floor and ate my food. It was dark outside but just enough street lighting that I could still see quite well. I headed back to the hostel to sit in the common room for a few hours. Later a group of Russians invited me out drinking but I declined.

I woke up the next day and headed back to Lampugnano bus station where I would catch my penultimate bus to Lugano, Switzerland.

Lugano - 05/06/2017 - 07/06/2017

I had planned to spend about a week in Switzerland, slowly making my way north back home. I was conflicted, I was bored of backpacking but felt I could not rush home. I have an incredible opportunity to experience all these great locations, even if I'm bored out of my mind. Either way this would be my last country that I would visit on my 3 month trip but I also knew it would be the most expensive.

Once I arrived in Lugano it was raining heavily, apparently the area around the Alps gets a lot of rain this time of year. The bus was being battered by the rain and the temperature had got eerily cold. I also knew it would be a long walk into the centre of Lugano to my hostel, I would probably get very wet. The bus stopped near a large empty square with a football field nearby on the outskirts of the city. Nobody was walking around the streets in this rain. I got off the bus with only a handful of other people as most were continuing on further north. I got my backpack out of the hold and started to put the bright orange water proof cover that was in a hidden pocket. I had never needed to use the cover before and had only discovered it had one when I was in Prague. I also took out my big floppy hat as an attempt to stop the water getting into my eyes and on my glasses.

While I was doing this a couple that had also departed the bus with me came over and asked how far it was into the centre. They told me they had only come to Lugano for a day trip and were not prepared for the weather. The bus had dropped us off in a very isolated area with not much to do or see. I told them I was just going to be walking into the centre and that it would be about an hour walk. I was not very prepared for rain myself, my coat was after all not water proof. They did not seem thrilled at the idea of walking for an hour in the rain, they probably had expected to be dropped off in the centre but not many long distance buses do that.

I left the couple at the bus station, I doubt that they walked into the centre like me. I also can't imagine they had a very fun day going from and then back to Milan by bus, that alone would take up most of their day. By the time I arrived in the centre I was totally soaked, my hat had become water logged and so floppy it was blocking my vision. My shoes were also totally inappropriate, they were only made of like a webbed material to help airflow, the opposite of water proof. So with every step my socks squelched as the water was squeezed out. Even my coat was heavy with the water it had soaked up.

I walked into a large square and approached a woman to ask directions she was standing under cover from the rain. The sun was starting to come out again as the rain broke. She could not help me find my hostel so I went into a supermarket called "Manor" to buy some thing to drink. I carried on walking using my compass to direct me south west, I knew the train station was somewhere south west and train stations are very difficult to miss. I found it, crossed the tracks and headed up a hill to a hostel/ hotel called Montarina.

I checked in knowing Switzerland used a different currency, but I also found that Switzerland used a different electric plug socket. I had to borrow one from reception in order to charge everything, my laptop with an English plug was converted to a European plug and then to a Switzerland plug. I was worried it would break my laptop. I had a shower and relaxed in the hostel for a few hours before

heading back out to the centre to find food. I ended up going back to the Manor supermarket, they had a cafeteria that served cheap hot food and had indoor seating. I bought more snacks and headed back to the hostel, it was still raining a little outside but not as much as earlier.

The dorm room in the hostel was clean but really big. I was sharing a room with maybe 20 other beds and I had no private floor space as my bed was next to a door. All my clothes were either soaked from the rain or dirty so I just washed everything and placed it to dry around my bed. I spent the night watching YouTube videos and reading in the common room until I was kicked out and went to sleep.

The next day I walked along the coast of lake Lugano, you could look across the lake and into Italy. The city was full of high end tourist shops selling expensive fashion items. It also had shops openly selling guns and knives. I knew that when I got back to the UK I would be buying camping equipment so I decided to buy a Swiss Army Knife while I was actually in Switzerland, not sure if I would be allowed to bring it back to the UK. I got lunch in McDonald's, it was as expensive as Paris or Belgium. I continued walking to the park Foce del Cassarate, it was not raining and it was busy with people and children. The views across the lake were really nice. I walked up and back into the centre and then back to the hostel.

Back at the hostel I decided I would go for a swim since the weather had improved. The hostel had an outdoor swimming pool and it was just warm enough so that it was comfortable to swim. The swimming pool was also empty, nobody even sitting down on the chairs. I then relaxed for a few hours in the common room. It had again started raining and I had got bored of sitting around on my own. I put my still wet coat and floppy hat on and headed out in the rain for a night walk. This time I walked south west, to a part of the city I had not yet been. I knew it was likely to have the best views of the mountain across the lake.

I walked for about an hour along the coast in the dark, the streets were empty because of the heavy rain. I liked having the time to think with nobody around me. After I had walked long enough I turned back and took a different route walking through some side streets. I got back to the hostel late but still not late enough that I wanted to go to bed, the common room was closed already so I sat in a shared room where they had lockers and the bathrooms. I spent a few hours on my laptop until a guy and two women came in, they had been in the swimming pool and were going to take showers. But they were aggressive and loud despite it being around 1am, they were seriously annoying. Then I noticed they all went into the same shower cubicle together. The laughing quickly turned into moaning but I had no where else to go in the hostel with the common room closed. So I got angry and had to sit outside on some steps for another hour.

It was sitting outside on those steps that I decided to put an end to the trip. Instead of staying in Zurich next I would go straight to either Paris or Belgium by train, and then hopefully back home the next day. The idea of flying back had not even entered my mind. I went to bed angry, annoyed and with all my clothes soaked wet.

I woke up the next morning, had hostel breakfast one last time, checked out and made my way down the hill to the train station. My clothes and coat had not dried over night so everything was wet, including my shoes. On the way down the hill I walked passed the two women that had sex together in the shower last night, they recognised me and laughed, they must have only been 18.

The Long Way Back - 07/06/2017 - 08/06/2017

I walked down to the train station in Lugano and waited in the queue at the ticket desk. I knew it would be a long day so I made sure to get up early to give me the best chance of getting home. Once it was my turn I asked the lady at the desk to check the prices for tickets to either Paris or Belgium. I knew that to go straight to London would be really expensive as the Euro Tunnel would likely add £100+ to the ticket. She told me that I could get to Paris for £120 so I paid she then said I would first go to Zurich and then catch a 2nd train to Paris. I would arrive in Paris around 5pm.

I got some food for the train journey and quickly boarded the train. I had somehow found myself sitting down in first class, I had not noticed any sign telling me it was first class. I started a conversation with a man sitting next to me, I told him my story about how I was trying to get back home. He asked why I did not just fly back home, at that point I had not thought about flying, but it would have also felt wrong to end my trip with just an easy boring flight. He also informed me that I would be travelling through the worlds longest train tunnel, the Gotthard Base Tunnel that goes through the Alps. After half an hour a ticket collector came and kicked me out of first class, I said goodbye to the man and moved forward in the train until I found a seat.

The train made its way to Zurich where I had 30 minutes to wait for my connecting train to Paris. I decided to get coffee as I noticed a Starbucks nearby. The price of the coffee looked like it was twice as expensive as in the UK! I was glad I would not be staying here very long after all. I then boarded my 2nd train to Paris, not having any time to walk further into Zurich.

Arriving in Paris, I felt so close to home, almost as if Paris itself was my home. I had spent so long away from the UK that I could feel how close I was. The shops, the building and cars, everything was becoming more like home. No more unknown currencies or alphabets. I had spent 5 days here 3 months ago and found that I could navigate Paris very easily. I knew I had a few options, I could either book a night in a hostel and get home tomorrow or I could take a night bus to London. The night bus would be the cheapest and fastest option. I needed WiFi in order to make a plan so I found a little fast food shop selling Pizza that advertised free WiFi. I walked in tested that the WiFi worked and ordered the cheapest thing on the menu, a crepe. I sat down and found a cheap night bus to London leaving in a few hours, just enough time to get some food. Relaxed that I now had a plan I ordered a Calzone from the menu and sat back down.

The night bus would depart from the Porte Maillot bus station, the same station I had departed Paris for Brussels. I had actually planned for this situation 3 months ago and saved a single metro ticket in my wallet this whole time. I took the metro to the bus station early as I was just eager to get home. At the bus station I started a conversation with a tall adventurous woman named Lisa from a Scandinavian country, I cant remember which one. I remember that she had a very expensive looking backpack, one with metal support built in. It was at this point it hit me. I announced to her that I had now been to this bus station twice and both times I was sleep deprived because people had decided to have sex in front of me. She then told me a story about one of her friends who drunkenly had sex on a Flixbus full of people.

Her bus arrived before mine and I said goodbye. About 15 minutes later my bus arrived and I was the first to board. I sat towards the back of the bus, hoping I would be able to stretch my legs and get some sleep. An English woman boarded the bus and set on the chairs next to me. The bus departed Paris and me and the woman spoke until we arrived in Calais, we both knew it would be hard to sleep knowing we will have to go through border control. She told me she was from England but actually identified as being "International".

Once we arrived in Calais it was dark and we all got off the bus to have our passports checked by the French police. First we placed our bags into a scanner, like they have in airports. They either did not notice or did not care about my Swiss army knife inside. We entered a building and one by one we handed over our passports. A tall black man in front of us was rejected by the French police, I could hear as they claimed the photo on the passport looked nothing like him and a young officer turned away and smirked. It was also the first time in three months that I had heard a large group of English people, British police officers were here. When the British officers checked my passport I was overly happy and courteous with them, being as British as I possibly could. We boarded back on the bus and headed to London. The bus drove onto the train and we went through the Channel Tunnel. I had now travelled along the worlds longest train tunnel and the worlds 3rd longest train tunnel, both on the same day.

Both me and the "International" woman were lying down on the back seats to try and sleep. I don't think that I slept at all but before I knew it we were in London. We both go off the bus at the same station I had departed 3 months ago, Victoria Coach Station. We exited the building, said good bye, hugged and headed off in our separate directions. I don't know why I did this but I could have just caught a bus back home from this station, but I didn't. I didn't even think to catch a bus back home. I subconsciously knew I wanted to end as I started, by taking the train back. I walked across London back to the train station I had arrived in London 3 months ago. I paid for a super off peak single to my home town and I had to wait for a few hours. It was still really early, maybe 7am.

I went to a small Sainsburys super market and purchased a meal deal. I had missed the luxury of being able to walk into a supermarket and buy ready made sandwiches. I went back into the train station to eat but found it way too busy. So I walked outside placed my coat on the floor as a blanket and sat to eat and read my kindle. After 30 minutes a police officer walked over and questioned me thinking that I was homeless, he was surprised once I told him that I had a train to catch. He warned me it would get busy in another hour and I agreed I would move somewhere else. Once I noticed it getting busy with people making their way to work, I walked a little further from the train station and carried on reading.

Once it was time to catch my train I headed back to Euston and boarded. The train took a few hours and then I had to catch another connecting train. It was about 1pm once I arrived at my destination. I then walked the 3 miles back to my house, the last long walk of my trip. I walked up to my house, unlocked the door and my dog was confused for a few seconds, he was not sure if he should be happy or angry. He had not seen me for 3 months and looked shocked to see me, but he eventually ran up to me with his tail wagging. I dumped my bag down stairs and went straight up stairs to take a shower. I had been travelling for two whole days and my feet hurt, they were all torn up from not taking off my shoes. I was back home.

The Endless Hostel

A couple years after my backpacking trip, now over 30 years old, I find myself looking to purchase property and I see an advertisement online.

A freehold bunk bed with a large locker, sharing a 20 bed room in a mixed gendered backpackers hostel. A unique opportunity for the bargain price of £40,000.

That sounds perfect for me! A chance to live in a hostel permanently. So I go take a look.

I walk to the local city centre, enter the hostel and two men in suits greet me. I introduce myself and they quickly offer to show me the bed. We walk into the large empty hostel dormitory, the hostel had only just been founded, everything was new and it had no guests. One of these new communal living start ups you often hear about (At least pre-covid!). They show me the bunk bed, it's in the middle of the room surrounded on all sides by other beds but I can have the bottom bunk they tell me! The locker is a full height one with a metal mesh door, the kind where your bag straps always find ways to dangle out the gaps.

I tell the men: "This is great! I'd love to purchase the bed, when can I move in?"

They reply: "Tonight, just get your belongings, we can check you in now."

I'm really looking forward to spending the rest of my life living in a hostel!

I check in and hand over the £40,000, my entire life savings, I'm the proud owner of a hostel bed. Before night time my room has filled up with teenage backpackers and students messing around and drinking alcohol. I climb into my bed and try to get some sleep, I have work in the morning. The young eastern European woman on the bed above me says she will try to keep quiet.

Excellent, how exciting is this?

Then I wake up terrified and mentally drained, I look around only to find my old room. Thankful it was all just a dream and I was not stupid enough to spend my life savings on a hostel bed.

Thoughts and Reflections

"No man ever steps in the same river twice, for it's not the same river and he's not the same man."

— **Heraclitus**

After getting back home I quickly managed to find a woman and had a romantic relationship, all the backpacking photos probably helped. I had also become very competent at organising dates, I knew what to do, where to go, backpacking on your own gives you that skill. But I found it difficult. I already had my life in order alone, I realised that I didn't need anyone.

Am I attractive? That was the biggest shock to me, that women wanted to speak to me, spend time with me and be romantically involved in me. Before leaving for this trip I had never received attention from women. Working in a male dominated industry online dating was the only obvious option for meeting women, but I've never had a match on Tinder. When Alise asked if I wanted children she might as well have been asking if I wanted to live on Mars.

A couple years after this trip I went back to the Netherlands. Primarily to travel around more like I did in Belgium but also to re-address the Magic Mushroom question and to try and re-kindle the same experience I had a few years prior. While I was there I met up with Alise again, she appeared to have left her previous boyfriend and was in a relationship with a tall Australian man. Hopefully she managed to have her family. For me the Mushrooms were the only thing that lived up to expectations. I had got bored of travelling, it was no longer the same river and I was no longer the same man.